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Smart Mouth
[stories]

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Nonfiction

by
Tyler Gillespie

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2010
B.S. University of Central Florida, 2010

May, 2016

“We can’t expect family to be perfect. They’ll aggravate you and get on your nerves. People don’t always tell the truth. They don’t always do what you want them to do. You know more about them than anyone else, but you’re still going to love them anyway. That’s the beauty of family.”

- my grandmother (after a rather heated exchange when I didn’t immediately say “hi” to her as I walked into her house)

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[for the past]

On Aging: “When you get older you don’t care about certain things any more. You do what you want to do.”

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On Our Own

Gray Areas

Florida is officially the sunshine state and unofficially the retirement state, so for a pale native like me that means I’m an expert on two things: sunburns and senior citizens. As a young child, I dreaded the beach because I burned in about .5 seconds, but I loved to hang out with old people. Mom worked long hours as a waitress, and I spent many nights with my great-grandmother Granny Lula who lived in a 55-year-old-and-over mobile home park. Nights at Granny Lula’s place proved magical, because she told me farm life stories – she used to pluck chickens! – and the mobile home park where she lived had a shuffleboard court. On overcast days, I’d venture out to the court to strike up a game with retirement aged shuffle boarders who wore short shorts and pushed discs across a long, green court into their opponent’s triangle to score points. In those days being old looked like so much fun to me. Senior citizens played shuffleboard all day, received discounts at movie theaters, and ate dinner at luxurious times in the early afternoon. I wanted nothing more than to be part of the cool, 55+ crowd. But, about two decades later, my mother pointed out my first gray hairs and my outlook changed.

On a day in late-June, Mom smoked a Virginia Slims Menthol as we sat under the attached carport of her house. I was 28 and home from graduate school for the summer. My newly sprouted gray hair felt like an ugly reminder of my body’s impending breakdown. I know

that's a groan-worthy sentiment coming from someone who's only 28. But as mom told me after she found my gray hair: "Everyone looks so young to me, now. Everyone except me." I had already spotted the wiry gray imposters, but I'd convinced myself no one else would notice. *They blend in with the sides of my head*, I thought, *If Anderson Cooper can rock this so can I.*

As a gay guy I am acutely aware of aging. It's like gay men age in dog years. My friend told me that at 37 he's "too old to be cute." He and I lived in po-boy-and-shrimp-remoulade-eating New Orleans, so I couldn't imagine the cut-off-for-cute age in hipper gay places like West Hollywood or NYC. In a recent interview, out rock musician John Grant, 47, said: "This aging thing is quite strange... Youth is prized above all things – the beauty of youth – and I know a lot of gay men who are very, very obsessed with keeping young." I had thought my childhood spent with old people meant I got to skip the whole existential crisis of age thing some of my friends already experienced. I had spent all my life in preparation for sunburns and my AARP card, but under Mom's carport I felt like a fraud. Who had I been trying to kid? Getting old sucks.

My family has a history of later-in-life health complications: Granny Lula developed pancreatitis before she died, Mom already underwent back surgery, and my grandfather passed away after a leg amputation due to diabetes. My 72-year-old grandmother, whom I call "Gramel," won't even go to the grocery store by herself anymore, because she's worried about falling. This is a woman who once closed-fist punched me on Thanksgiving Day for my "smart mouth" and recently told me "nice, quiet people don't go down in history."

To combat my gray hair anxiety, I flipped through one of the lifestyle magazines Mom kept on the table near her small garden overflowing with butterfly-attracting lupines, Mexican petunias, and lots of other plants. That month's edition happened to reprint vintage, 1939 tips for dealing with gray hair. "Dye your hair if you must," the vintage magazine editors had stated.

“The other alternative, much the wiser, is to accept gracefully the distinction nature is bestowing on one.” Mom’s gray hair sighting and the magazine’s tips lead me to an idea: I’d revert to my childhood mindset and hang out with senior citizens. I’d try to talk to them in order to figure out how this whole “aging gracefully” thing actually works.

*

Fever, Karaoke Veterans, and a Pack of Pall Malls

Whenever I visited home, I stayed in my childhood room full of NBA memorabilia and Harry Potter merchandise at Gramel’s house. She and I had spent most of that summer watching cooking shows and True Crime programs she DVR’ed, her pinnacle of technological expertise. We also went to the movie theater as much as possible, specifically to help support her celebrity crush Channing Tatum’s stripper-movie *Magic Mike XXL*. My grandmother is always up for an activity, so when I suggested we sing karaoke with those the Center’s website called the “actively aging,” we immediately began the all-important conversation on song choice. Years earlier, I had made a song choice mistake when I sang karaoke with Gramel and her old people crew at the nearby the American Legion Post. That night’s performers brought their own CDs with personal arrangements of songs like the Eurhythmics “Sweet Dreams” and Sheryl Crow’s “Picture” (featuring Kid Rock). They practiced throughout the week to get harmonies right for duets. I sang Gretchen Wilson’s “Here for the Party.” I got to the song’s lyrics *I may not be a ten but the boys say I clean up good*, and I almost quit; I worried the old men might spot the homosexual. But I powered through *bring on them cowboys and their pickup lines* and Gramel told me she was proud of me for getting up there.

I thought about song choice as I dropped Gramel off at the front of the Community Center on a Tuesday in late-June. I circled the parking lot with her grey station wagon and found a spot between “golf carts only” and a space occupied by a Chrysler bumper-stickered with “Stop Pelosi – Boehner for Speaker.” A stone pathway led up to the multi-million dollar building’s angular front windows. Gramel paid \$1.25 apiece for us to sing, and we walked toward the karaoke room. A group of gray-haired ladies chatted in the lounge as a game of spades heated up. Two teenage girls practiced a dance routine in a studio. Inside the designated karaoke room, about 15 people at three cafeteria-style tables listened as a man in a teal shirt sang a golden oldies song I couldn’t quite place. I followed Gramel’s lead, and we found two open chairs. The host, who looked slim and senior cool like Bob Barker, slipped me a piece of paper torn from a Hearing Center advertisement that stated “we service all brands of hearing aids.” Bob Barker then pointed toward a group of primary colored folders and told me to pick a song.

“I have anything you could want,” he said. “If I don’t have it then someone in this room will.”

Community Center karaoke works on rotation; the room was reserved for three hours, so each singer would get about three turns in the spotlight. There’s a set list of people and the host cycles through them to assure everyone has equal stage time. Gramel and I had come in later than the major singers, who brought their own karaoke discs, so we needed to hurry up and write down songs to get in the rotation. I had learned the importance of song selection, so I made a safe choice of the Mommas and the Papas’ “California Dreamin” for my solo. I’ve often ranted to people about how the group had mistreated Cass, because she wasn’t “thin” and that *no, she didn’t die because of a ham sandwich*. Anyway, I tried to settle in and get my bearings, but before I knew it, Bob Barker called my name to perform. Well, he had at first called me “Taylor”

but I corrected him and a short-haired woman had said, “Good, because we don’t want any Taylor Swift in here.”

When the music for “California Dreamin’” pumped through Bob Barker’s tiny speakers, I channeled the group’s Momma Cass. As with most things in life, the key to any good karaoke performance is commitment, especially a summer afternoon with longing *on such a winter’s day*.

“That took us back to the 60s,” shouted Carolyn, a woman with curly hair in the second row. “I can see the surfers out on the beach. That was great.”

Carolyn’s response made me immediately like her, because she possessed a great eye for talent. I secretly believe I’m an undercover pop star. After I sang, it was Gramel’s turn. I’ve always loved my grandmother’s voice, she can trill like a bird. She had expected the 1950s Julie London song “Cry Me a River,” but Bob Parker had instead slotted pop star Justin Timberlake’s song of the same name. She’d never heard his song, but she stayed effortlessly cool and improvised a melody. I admired her confidence. Gramel wasn’t the only dedicated singer as Carolyn later performed a show-stopping routine to “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee” from *Grease*. She acted out *I don’t rat my hair* then pretended to puff on a real Pall Mall for *I get ill from one cigarette*. It could have easily gone viral on YouTube.

“There’s divas, and then there’s divas,” Bob Barker said when Carolyn finished the song.

“I’m a pharaoh diva,” she responded. “The ruler of all divas.”

In some way, all of the singers, both men and women, were divas in the best connotation of the word. A lot of the singers brought their own discs and told Bob Barker *this time, number four* when they went up to sing. An almost-80-year-old woman sat in her chair while she sang. Pat, a tan, lean woman sang Peggy Lee’s “Fever” and flirted with the men – she pulled Bob Barker closer to her and fake kissed him. The cake on the snack table had been brought to

celebrate Pat's five first place ribbons at a swim meet. Her platonic friend Tony showed off his forearm tattoo, a faded anchor, when he sang and paraded around with his chest puffed out. As the host, Bob Barker worked the room. He dressed in a checkered, golf-caddie shirt and gave little facts about songs and commented on each singer's style. One woman sang a song completely in Spanish, and he busted out real maracas.

"We're an inviting group," said a woman next to Gramel. "We want people to come back."

Bob Barker slotted me to sing last – or to "take us out" as he said. Gramel suggested we sing Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe" as a duet. *OK, but I'm definitely the Cher in this situation*, I thought as I handed in the song choice. When the lyrics came up, I couldn't remember which parts Cher sang and which belonged to Sonny. This didn't matter, though. We alternated the "I Got You Babe" chorus, which, of course, is the most fun part to sing when your grandmother can carry a tune. Before we left karaoke, I got on the karaoke mic to ask if anyone would let me interview them about aging. Pat, Carolyn, and Bob Barker signed up.

"I wouldn't have given you my number," Gramel said on our way home. "We could have been a con artist team. You never know what people are going to do."

*

#1 Pat, 73, New Hampshire

The Athletic Seamstress's Guide to Fitness and Old Mares

About a week after karaoke, I drove Gramel to Pat's double-wide in a mobile home park. As a reporter, I usually interview people on my own, but Gramel thought it'd be more fun and productive if we did it together. Old ladies love to talk to each other, and by now I'm used to being a slightly red-faced fly on the wall for these types of conversations. Pat had given the flirtatious performance of "Fever" at karaoke, and I imagined she might be one of those "ladies who early bird" and make bawdy jokes about long-dead male celebrities. In short, I thought we'd get along smashingly. I parked Gramel's station wagon in front of fake flowers planted in real soil. Gramel told me to leave the windows down, because her car's AC was still broken. This is God's car," she said, "so if anyone steals from it they're stealing from God."

"I hope you're not allergic to cats," Pat said to us. "I have two."

"We're not," Gramel said. "Cats are fun."

Inside the mobile home, framed swimming ribbons covered the walls. These were placed next to pictures of Pat's only child, a son named Gerard who's a black belt in karate. The living room smelled like cleaning products mixed with old carpet, which, if bottled, could be called "weekend at grandma's place." Forest-green carpet from the 70s ran throughout the house. A dish of chocolate chip cookies wrapped in plastic stood next to a bowl of fruit. Pat wore sapphire earrings that matched her eyes. There was a small gap in her teeth reminiscent of a "quirky" 90s runway model. We sat down at the kitchen table, and Pat offered us glasses of tea. From my chair, I saw an American flag attached to neighbor's mobile home.

“I don’t think of aging as aging,” Pat said. “I think of it as experiences.”

Pat grew up a tomboy in New Hampshire, and still had the accent – she pronounced party as “pah-ty” and said “idea-rs.” As a teenager, she competed on the swim team and loved it so much she later coached the sport. The weekend before our interview, she had taken home five first places ribbons in a swim meet, and she hoped to go to the national championships to compete in the 70-to-74-year-old division. All ages, she said, can compete – there’s even a “90 and up” category. Pat trains about three times a week and says she bikes every day if it’s not too hot. The backstroke is her best event. To be honest, she’s most definitely in better shape I am. She learned how to surf in her sixties and loves to ride horses, old mares and “young bucks.”

“I have arthritis, but it’s not going to beat me, I’ll be danged,” she said. “I have a bike and there’s always the pool.”

Along with swim practice and karaoke sessions, Pat spends a good deal of her time in the production of scripted shows with themes such as “Country Bumpkin” and “Broadway.” To promote her shows, she invites people from other mobile home parks.

“I fill the hall,” she said. “My shows are geared to seniors and done by seniors. They just want something to do.”

Pat showed Gramel and me an album filled with photos of the costumes she’d sewn along with prize-winning Halloween creations like a spot-on Wonder Woman and Elvira. These were impressive and elaborate. She had created a full bat costume with a nearly 18-foot wingspan. [Note: it’s always weird and kind of fun when an older person shows you a photo of their younger self and they’re like *hot* and Pat most definitely was.] Pat had acted as a vice president for her mobile home park’s entertainment committee, but stepped down because of drama.

“They were jealous,” she said. “They said I was too professional.”

I wanted to ask Pat more about senior citizen drama, because I love a good piece of gossip. But I never got around to the dirt, because Gramel kept gently interrupting me. A journalism professor once advised my class to talk less during interviews. He said good reporters don't hear their voices often in transcripts, because they've asked smart questions. I wanted to pull Gramel to the side and relay this information to her, but I decided to eat a chocolate chip cookie instead. As my blood sugar stabilized, I decided to get over myself and just listen to the two women talk. They were both 72 years old and had been born only a month apart. They talked about growing up in the 1950s, and then the conversation turned to one of my favorite topics: men.

Pat married for the first time at age 24, had her only child, then found out this husband was "a gay." Since then, she's married three times – the longest lasted 11 years – and sewed her own dresses for both the second and fourth ceremonies. Pat told us she had moved to Florida, near the age of 50, because of an abusive relationship. Her parents lived in the same mobile home park she lives in now, and she wanted to be closer to them for safety.

"I didn't realize how strong I was until I walked away from that man," said Pat. "I thought if I could do that then, I could do anything."

"Since you've been in an abusive relationship," Gramel said to Pat, "I want you to learn that Dixie Chicks' song 'Earl's Gotta Die' for karaoke."

The song is officially titled "Goodbye Earl" and describes how two girlfriends kill an abusive man. Gramel loves this song; it's one of her anthems. After my grandfather died she had opened up to me about her own abusive relationship. "I loved the Lord and thought kids needed a father, so I stayed with my husband," she had told me only a few years earlier. "During this time and era, you didn't get a divorce." My grandfather had been my male role model, and it was hard

for me to hear about his violence. I didn't know what to say to her about him, so I usually just listened. It didn't feel like enough, but I was glad she could at least talk honestly to me. I didn't want her to carry the hurt of those years by herself.

"I didn't leave my husband," Gramel told Pat, "but I refused to become a victim."

Listening to older women talk to each other about their lives' hardships is magical; it like opened a time portal for me to understand some things. At Pat's kitchen table, I started to realize how much crap many grandmothers – not just my own – had gone through. Our grandmothers probably have some stories we might not want to hear. They kept parts of their lives bottled up to protect their abusers or because they felt like they couldn't leave.

Gramel wanted nothing more to do with men, but Pat hadn't given up on finding a companion. "I still like dating," she said. There's a singles dance at the Community Center, and Pat often goes there to either dance with her friends or to try to find someone interesting. "Dating leads to things," Gramel responded, "and I don't want those things."

On our way out, Pat showed me a book full of her old swim photos. There was a swim meet coming up, and she looked forward to getting back in the pool.

*

#2 Carolyn Burke, 60, New Jersey

Reverend Hambone

On Mondays and Wednesdays, Carolyn – who sang "Look at Me, I'm Sandra Dee" at karaoke – volunteered as a Community Center greeter. Gray curly hair bounced as I watched her talk to a person at the Center who wanted to know about art classes. Four strands of pink beads matched

her pink shirt. A former preschool teacher, she'll "say hello to a telephone pole," and described herself as a "frickin' hambone." As a shy child, I had always wanted to be a Carolyn, someone who made strangers comfortable, made them feel like they'd finally found the right place.

After her shift ended, Carolyn led Gramel and me to the Community Center's lounge, full of Mary Higgins Clark books. Carolyn grew up in a "pretty little town with pretty little shops and boardwalks" in New Jersey. [Quick Note: I've always thought of Florida and New Jersey as misunderstood statehood siblings; Florida has "crazy" stories and New Jersey found national notoriety via MTV's reality show *Jersey Shore*]. Carolyn's husband lost his job fifteen years ago and her company "went bankrupt, too." Around this time of financial hardship, they inherited a one-bedroom house in a 55-year-old-and-older mobile home park. Carolyn and her husband stayed in the mobile home park for a while, but they were kicked out because, at 45 and 50, respectively, the powers-that-be eventually deemed them too young to live there. "It's not like we're hooligans who had wild parties every night," she said. "We didn't throw furniture through the windows."

In high school, Carolyn had a creative and "eccentric" personality, but it wasn't until she retired to Florida that she was able to tap into her artistic side as an adult. "When people are retired, they don't have time constraints," she said, "and they get a chance to do what they want to do." Carolyn said she's happy in retirement because she can "wear a nightgown all day." This newfound time has also allowed her to take singing lessons, jewelry making classes, and sign up for pottery studio. For an upcoming talent show, she planned to dress as a nun and sing "I Will Follow Him" from *Sister Act*. This routine is especially funny to her, because she's an ordained minister. I wanted to ask Carolyn's thoughts on gay marriage, because the Supreme Court had recently given it the yes, but I didn't want our conversation to potentially fly off the rails.

Instead, I said: “It seems like you’re open to new things.”

“I’m trying to be a better person – more understanding, nicer, not judgmental,” she said.

“I’m trying to not take anyone’s inventory like ‘well, *you* did this.’ Well, Carolyn, get over yourself – who cares? That’s their business.”

To this point, Gramel responded: “If people are not turned off to thinking of something a different way, then that’s a good thing. People who don’t have a closed mind can learn.”

Gramel and Carolyn seemingly forgot I was there. They went off on many tangents about such topics as ghosts – Carolyn’s seen one, so has Gramel – and Elvis, they both had watched the same Elvis impersonator show earlier in the month. “No one could make a young girl scream like Elvis could,” said Gramel. “I guess Justin Bieber, now, but I don’t care for him.” Carolyn’s writing a book on interpreting dreams, so Gramel relayed a recurring one in which she’s a naked high schooler and must decide if she’s going to cover her “top or bottom” with a washcloth in order to get home. Then, they landed on the topic of marriage.

Gramel: “My counseling would be don’t do it. It’s too much work, and it never stops.

Carolyn (still married): “Right. That’s it – my counseling, too.”

As in the interview with Pat, I found myself in the middle of a conversation between two women who wanted nothing more than to exchange stories with each other. I’d never heard men talk to each other in this way, so I started to wonder if women were the only ones to ever have these open conversations about love and life and wisdom. Bob Barker had canceled on me – again – and he’d been the only man to show any interest in an interview.

“Do you think men age differently than women?” I asked.

“They don’t live as long in general,” said Carolyn. “When it comes to sickness, men either carry on because of a hangnail – like the angel of death is coming for them – or they’re about to have a heart attack and won’t go to the hospital.”

“Men keep things a secret like the armed forces,” Gramel said.

“Women are more aware of their bodies,” said Carolyn, “and they feel like they can share with their best friends. We have more confidants. If a man shares things people might think he’s unmanly, but it’s not weakness – it is humanity.”

“We go to fun social things and like to learn,” said Gramel. “Men just want to watch TV. That’s why I won’t date anymore.”

“I see women in the park and some of them lost their husbands 20 years ago,” said Carolyn. “I am so proud of them, because they’re still having full lives – they’re doing things, they’re having fun. I think *you go girl*.”

*

#3 Jacqueline Blad, 62, Redding, Pennsylvania

This Janis Joplin’s Time is Now

Gramel said she needed a break from the interviews. I had at first been slightly resentful of the way she dominated them, but after the chat with Carolyn realized I had learned a lot about my grandmother through this process. And I could just sit back, turn on my recorder, and let her gab for an hour or two. She had become the Harper Lee to my Truman Capote. It almost didn’t feel right to conduct the final interview without her, but all my attempts to coerce her to join me

failed, so Carolyn's friend Jacqueline and I sat in the Community Center's lounge by ourselves. Jacqueline spoke with a Janis Joplin rasp, wore a leopard print cardigan, and let her gray-ish brown hair fall to her shoulders. Her vibe reminded me of a cool librarian, the kind who sets up a "banned books" display. I thought I'd get some nice insight and a few quick anecdotes on age, but Jacqueline's story soon surprised me. People seem to live in past glory days, but some peoples' glory days, I learned, happen much later in life.

"When I was younger I didn't have confidence," she said. "Time and age are good."

On a Christmas Eve in the 1950s, a drunk driver ran into her parents' automobile. Her father died that night, and her mother passed away on Christmas morning. At only two-years-old Jacqueline, the middle child, and her two siblings were orphans and faced separation. Her maternal grandparents, who neared their 70s, decided to care for the three children: aged eight-months, two, and five-years-old. Jacqueline's happiest childhood memories are long walks in the woods with her brother and grandfather, who carried a cane to ward off copperhead snakes in Pennsylvania. Jacqueline spent seven years in relative happiness with her grandparents, but then her grandmother, the family's backbone, died. Her grandfather couldn't take care of three small children, so Jacqueline's aunt moved in with them to help. This move seemed like a good one, but her aunt's two boys were "mean, hateful, and ornery." The dynamic in the house drastically changed and Jacqueline often hid under her bed to escape the boys who relentlessly called her lazy and no-good. Around this time, she began to sleep an unusual amount.

"I slept my childhood away," she said. "I could go to sleep on a dime."

No one could figure out what was wrong with her, and she received long beatings for supposed laziness. She eventually became so shy and meek that she'd jump when a person dropped something. Jacqueline needed to get away from the beatings and mental abuse, so she

married at 16. Then, she gave birth to a son while her husband fought in Vietnam. “My son and I grew up together,” she said. “I didn’t have a mother or father, so I didn’t have anyone to show me how to raise a child.” Four years later she had her daughter. As with Gramel and Pat, Jacqueline stayed in an unhappy marriage, because she thought she needed to stay with her husband. That’s all she “knew to do.” Eventually, though, she divorced him. But years later her extreme sleep issue – the one she’d been beaten for as a child – caused Jacqueline’s body had physically shut down. And she arose from a three-month coma at age 32 to find herself embroiled in a custody battle. She’d been cognitively aware during her whole months-long hospital stay.

“I could hear everything, but I couldn’t move,” she said. “I was a prisoner in my own body.”

The fact that she was aware but couldn’t move terrified me; it’s like a Stephen King plot but one enacted on Jacqueline’s body by her own mind. I completely didn’t expect this story, and I felt moved to tears. Jacqueline said her medical incident actually served as a turning point in her life, because after three decades of trying, doctors were finally able to diagnose her disease: narcolepsy cataplexy hallucinations.

“People had made me think I was bad and lazy,” she said. “Then, there was a name for what I have.”

Narcolepsy caused Jacqueline to randomly fall asleep. Cataplexy rendered her body immobile and also made her look drunk which added to the “no good” taunts she’d heard. At 32, Jacqueline finally had a diagnosis and the right medicine to help control her disease. This diagnosis changed how she felt about herself.

“You need to not whisper but shout that you’re all right,” she said. “It needs to come from your guts, from your pit. Nobody should be treated terrible.”

Age gave her power denied in youth. Now, at age 62, she keeps a bucket list. Activities still on this list include: visiting Ecuador to see her niece, walking in the Holy Lands, rafting down a river, seeing the pyramids and Mount Rushmore, and digging for diamonds in Arkansas.

“You have to ask yourself if you want to be sad in the corner or if you want to see the sunshine,” she said. “Well, I want to see the sunshine, and I want to do things.”

One of the things she’d always wanted to do but been too shy to do was sing karaoke. It took her a year of visiting the Community Center before she finally took the mic and sang Janis Joplin’s “Bobby McGee.”

“It’s my time now,” she said before we hugged goodbye. “I’m doing things I always wanted to do.”

I’m not sure why, but I felt closer to Jacqueline than to anyone I’d interviewed. We talked for less than an hour, but we bonded in the deep way that only stories enable.

*

An Unexpected Final Interview

About three weeks before Gramel’s October birthday, I dreamt she died. A visceral loneliness – the kind that anchors itself somewhere deep in your chest – paralyzed my body. In the dream, I didn’t know why she had died, I just knew she did. This feeling made me cry so hard I woke myself up. Alone in my New Orleans bedroom, I understood I was more scared about people I love getting older than I was of my own impending old-age.

“When you age, people change around you, and that’s sad,” Gramel told me when I flew home to Florida in mid-October. “Friends die. Relatives go into nursing homes and get worse.”

We sat in her living room the week before Mom and Gramel’s birthday, a day they share. On my grandmother’s 19th birthday, she gave birth to my mom. I’d come home to celebrate their birthdays. In the day I’d been home, Gramel and I had watched TV – a marathon of *Scream Queens* she recorded because I’d once interviewed the show’s lead. As she had over the summer, she caught me up on celebrity gossip, mostly from her favorite show *Dancing with the Stars*. “Paula Deen used to be my girl,” she said, “but I think she needs therapy. She wants so much attention it’s embarrassing.” We also planned a lunch at a fancy restaurant. Mom had to work, so it was just the two of us. Gramel wore a yellow shirt emblazoned with the “John Deere” logo, carried a leather fringe American flag purse, and chose her festive cane covered in a bright, floral pattern.

Because I couldn’t afford a car, Gramel had let me drive her station wagon to New Orleans for the last year of my graduate school program. I hated the idea of my grandmother living a car-less life, but she told me her little-old-lady friend group rallied. They took her everywhere she had needed to go. I’d left the station wagon in New Orleans, so a white Tahoe soon pulled into Gramel’s driveway to chauffeur us to the car lot where we’d pick up our rental car. I placed my hand on Gramel’s back to help her step up into the hotel-tall Tahoe. She climbed into the front seat and sat next to a gray-haired man who wore a checkered shirt, bright tie, and a hearing aide in his right ear. He only had to drive us about five miles, but Gramel seemed determined to tell her whole life story.

“That’s where I was born,” she said as we passed the Old Johnson building. “It’s the only building in our town on the historical registry.”

I'd heard the story of my grandmother's birth many times. For one of Gramel's birthdays, I had even taken a series of Polaroid portraits in front of the three-story building, which had once been a repair shop on the ground floor and rental units on the third. Gramel had said that at-home births were just the way they did things back then. We passed the Community Center, our karaoke palace. Almost three months had passed since I talked to Pat, Carolyn, and Jacqueline. My interviews hadn't necessarily lead me to any ground-breaking conclusions on age. But I'm glad I talked to them, because I got to hear their stories. I'm starting to see age as just that: stories. And the more I've heard, told, shared, the better. Gramel asked the man questions about his life, but he gave us no stories. He hardly answered. He just shook his head and gave monotone responses. My grandmother, who has told me she's always wanted to be Barbara Walters, pushed him. Still, nothing. I remembered what Carolyn had said about old men, and I hoped I'd never be like our grumpy driver. I hoped to always find the time to hear a story from the "actively aging," or, as Gramel calls us, the whipper snappers.

The car we rented was an electric blue Chrysler, and I drove us to our favorite fancy restaurant in downtown St. Petersburg, a city that also happens to claim the world's oldest shuffleboard club, founded in 1924. On the way, we drove passed the tattoo shop Gramel and I had planned to get tattoos at over the summer. Her doctor had told her not to because her age, he said, put her at a greater risk of infection. When she told me his recommendation, I understood there's not much we can do to stave off age. We can exercise, keep the brain active, stay open-minded, and sing karaoke. But even the toughest of us will one day break down. It's what we do with our time to make stories that really counts.

“You can’t say getting older is fun, because you can’t do things like you used to,” she told me, “but I am doing things now that I thought I’d never be able to do, like make it on my own.”

Gamel and I eventually sat inside the fancy restaurant’s dining room, which looked out into the harbor full of boats bobbing on crystal water. Palm trees lined the street. The breeze blew in one of those beautiful Florida days that made so many older people retire to my home state. Our waiter, a cute man from Morocco – Gamel asked him, of course – brought us baked brie, bacon braised brussel sprouts, and steamed mussels sautéed in chorizo, saffron, and tomatoes. I discussed giving the waiter my number, and my Southern Baptist grandmother suggested I have cards made so I could easily pass out my digits. Instead of his own business card, our waiter gave us a complimentary box of pastries. My grandmother had told him we were there to celebrate.

On Change: “Things don’t happen overnight, so put your thoughts in a different place.”

*

I’m Going Home as Sung in The Rocky Horror Picture Show

For her 71st birthday, my Floridian grandmother married a strapping, 6-foot-2 guy with a shaved head nearly 40 years her junior. My grandmother, whom I call Gramel, faced an October audience of about 50 people in a dark movie theater. Her knee had recently been replaced, so she stood with her back close to a wall. From where I sat, with the other guests, I could see her weight shift as she tried to find stability.

“Who brought their grandmother to *Rocky Horror* for her birthday?” shouted Tor, a short man who had threatened the audience if we didn’t participate he would torture us “with a chainsaw.”

When I came out about seven years earlier, I could never have imagined that with my Southern Baptist grandmother I’d attend a show that even hinted gay people existed. This one even celebrated us. Gramel had responded to my sexuality more Charlton Heston Moses in the *Ten Commandments* than *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Now, as she stood in front of a crowd ready to do the Time Warp, she seemed about as far away from her initial response as the tides during Moses’s parting of the Red Sea.

I didn’t know how I should answer Tor’s question. I couldn’t take all the credit for Gramel’s *Rocky Horror* birthday, though. For years, she had wanted to see the show starring Tim Curry as Dr. Frank N. Furter and Susan Sarandon as Janet but thought none of her friends would be up for it. As any good grandson who abides by you-get-what-you-want-on-your-birthday

rules, I took her to the midnight shadow cast performance in which fans act out characters and the audience gets in on the action as well.

A spotlight shined on Gramel's shaved-head husband who then flashed a smile, bold and toothpaste commercial brilliant. The light turned to Gramel and lit up her red hair, often more orange-ish when dyed. She wore her silver framed glasses with transition lenses, which sometimes didn't transition in movie theaters.

I hope she can't see the audience, I thought. I don't want her getting embarrassed.

Tor called Gramel out, and she took a step forward from the lineup. She had been chosen for the wedding. Gramel had stayed with my grandfather for 47-and-a-half years. She'd told me another marriage wasn't for her. "Old men are gross," she had said. But, there she was, Janet to the shaved-head man's Brad.

I watched her grab onto the man's arm as she did mine when we walked together. My head itched and I wanted to take off my wig, but I knew Gramel would give me pursed-lips, her version of shade-eye, if I broke character. The wig completed my look. At least that's what Gramel had said when she helped me get my outfit together.

*

Before we left the house that night for the show, I had asked Gramel about my outfit. When one attends *Rocky Horror* with his grandma, one must choose the perfect costume. I wore a nearly floor-length black cape Gramel had bought me earlier in the week at one of our favorite spots Super Thrift, a warehouse full of mildew-laced clothes and aisles full of tchotchkes (a word my

uncle Thom used to say when referring to “dust-collecting crap.”) The cape was something I could see Liza Minnelli wearing to brunch, so naturally Gramel thought I needed to own it.

“Is this wig too much?” I asked Gramel as I stood in front of her hallway mirror. “I’m not going for drag queen.”

“It’s just dressing up,” she said. “Have fun with it and keep the wig on.”

We took a picture next to my adolescent bedroom filled with shelves of California Raisins. I had inherited my uncle’s love of tchotchkes, and these California anthropomorphized raisins sang “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” in late-1980s commercials to advertise the consumption of actual non-singing, dried grapes. These raisins seem to promote a form of cannibalism. Regardless of their politics, an Ebay search for California Raisins returns 1,850 listings. On the first of these pages, a member sells a “rare vintage Lick Broccoli,” which I happened to own. This is to say: I was a pretty thorough collector. Gramel and I snapped several more pictures near my collection. In the one we chose as best, she diva-whipped her hair like a backup dancer in a Beyoncé video.

I looked through the pictures and felt my outfit came off as incomplete. I shared my concerns with Gramel, and she told me to go into her room and find an accessory. Filled with pale pink pillows and country trinkets, her most recent development of interior design, Gramel’s bedroom felt smaller than it did in my childhood. All the pink made me think of a teenager, not a 71-year-old widow, but the aesthetic mirrored her hard candy – sometimes sweet, sometimes firm – way of life. Gramel kept a shiny armoire filled with costume jewelry rivaling any good high school theater department. The dark-wood armoire looked luxurious in the cramped space. I opened the top compartment. I hoped to find a brooch for my cape, as I surmised brooches would be the next season’s big accessory. Inside, I found gaudy rings. At Thanksgiving when I was a

teenager she had worn one of these rings when she punched me in the face after I said something “slick.” Gramel remembers it as a “slap,” but I’d bet my life it was closed fist. I had a knack for under-my-breath backtalk, and she’d answer my rude responses with “don’t be a smart mouth.” Now, in my mid-twenties, I felt like she’d made the right choice to lay hands on me. The hit didn’t leave a mark or anything; it just jolted me a bit and made me realize *this lady isn’t playin’ around with me and who knows what she’ll do next*. In Gramel’s room, I continued to pick through necklaces, long and fat. There were small pins placed in rows like crops. The box contained endless opportunities for costumes and characters and imagined stories at our disposal.

My eyes eventually landed on a silver pendant. The pendant encased a small photo of me at about age seven or eight. I sat in a white wicker chair. My tow-head and fluffy hair took up most of frame; I had my mom’s curly hair, a lifelong struggle in the Florida humidity. The pendant’s fragility made me think I would break it if I wore it. A hint of destruction flashed through my body, and I thought I might hide the pendant. Destroy it. I usually didn’t think about the year Gramel and I stopped talking, but it was shiny and heavy in the palm of my hand.

*

Gramel had learned about my “abomination,” as the Baptists called it, a little over a decade after that pendant picture had been taken. I think some gray-headed woman told she’d *heard* I liked boys. My grandparents had taken me to the same Southern Baptist megachurch my whole life, and I attended the church-sponsored school attached since kindergarten. Gramel and I had been very close in those lazy Florida days of my childhood when she’d time me doing an “obstacle

course,” over the stump and around the tree in my grandparents’ backyard. We watched *Designing Women* marathons and female gymnastics during the Olympics, most notably the Magnificent 7 and the 4’ 8” Kerri Strug’s iconic “You Can Do It” winning vault. We each wore one gold shoe to help Michael Johnson win all his gold medals in track. We kept a full count of USA medals on a big poster board we kept in the dining room. We bonded over NBA basketball; both of us obsessed over Karl Malone and John Stockton of the Utah Jazz. We even took a photo once at NBA City in front of a green screen that made us look like we were standing next to Stockton.

If I had a smart mouth as a teen, then by the time Gramel found out I was gay, I’d developed a full evil genius mouth. I’d kept my sexuality a secret for so long, and in my early twenties could not have cared less what my old-school grandmother thought of me. The two of us had been close during my childhood, but I’d seen my friends distance themselves from their uptight grandparents and families, so I could do the same. Our Olympic glory days had run their course. No more *Designing Women*. My religious grandmother and I were pitted against each other – the family version of the 90s epic rivalry between the Jazz and Bulls. *Gramel wouldn’t understand my being gay. She just couldn’t.*

“I don’t think I’m going to watch John anymore,” she said to me soon after I came out. “I turned two boys gay, and I don’t want to do the same to him.”

When my brother John was born Gramel had taken on the role of babysitter. *Why would she punish my mom and John for my sexuality?* He’s fifteen years younger than I am, and Mom worked long hours as a waitress, so Gramel helped out with John nearly every day of the week. The other boy Gramel had “turned gay” was her son, my uncle Thom.

My uncle's raspy voice envelops my childhood in sweet tea nights and fireflies. Uncle Thom had left Florida for a while to become a businessman who wore fancy suits with cufflinks and cologne that smelled expensive because it was. He drove a Mercedes and had lived all around the country, Virginia, Colorado, North Carolina. Mom and I visited him in those places, where I saw cornfields stretch for miles and felt snow for the first time. He seemed to know everything, so cool and confident. My uncle helped me perfect my cursive writing because he believed a person's handwriting predicted their intelligence. We'd sit for hours at the kitchen table as he instructed me to write and re-write the alphabet. This practice may seem outdated now, since some primary schools don't even teach cursive anymore, but to this day people almost always comment on my neat script when I handwrite something. As a child, I wanted to be like my uncle, but knew I could never pull off his crisp and clean style. He always told me to *keep my head up*, when I felt insecure, and *it'll be all right* when I made mistakes.

I don't remember the first time I understood Uncle Thom was gay. But I never knew a time he didn't live with his partner, whom most people referred to as "his friend." When I was a child, someone called the two of them "fudge-packers," but I didn't know what that meant. I'd been too afraid to ask because, deep down, I thought I might be one as well. If I couldn't name the feeling deep down in the pit of my stomach then it wasn't real.

*

At midnight showings of *Rocky Horror* a shadow cast acted out scenes, and the audience threw rice and toast at the movie screen.

Gamel and I very very very briefly considered bringing my eleven-year-old brother John with us to *Rocky Horror*, because we thought he'd like all the excitement. He had already watched three other movies, a "triple dip," with us at the theater that day – yes, Gamel and I watched a total of four movies at the theater in one day. We didn't want to exclude John from our plans, but after some debate decided against it. I imagined if anyone from child services ever found out we thought about taking him to such a show, I'd get banned from adulthood. In all fairness, I would tell Child Service Agent Joe, the idea popped in my head for the simple fact I didn't want John to feel left out. The thought of bringing John had slipped from my brain as quickly as money through my fingers because BAD WORDS. John has Down syndrome, and it's hard to get any kid – intellectual disability or not – to understand it's *OK to say these bad words in movies but not at school*. I get it AGENT JOE, there's ratings on movies for reasons, but, still, he would have cracked up to see Gamel get married in front of the theater's audience. Gamel sat down next to me after her marriage; she'd received the loudest applause of the night. We split a soda and settled in for the Sweet Transvestite songs courtesy of Dr. Frank N Furter. I'd never seen a shadow cast performance of the show, so I didn't know how sexual some of the actual audience participation would be. Gamel had loved *Magic Mike*, but *Rocky* got more than a little...kinky, not many grandsons would probably want to see it with their grandmother. There was one other older person in the audience, a woman who told me she saw the show every Friday night, but she was probably in her 50s and by herself. I have to admit I felt a little embarrassed in a couple more scandalous movie moments, but I seemed to be a bit more uptight than Gamel who laughed throughout the whole movie.

In an opening *Rocky Horror* scene, Janet and Brad, lost and wet, wander around the mansion. After my uncle's death, the same could be said about my family and me. He had

always been the grounded one, the person everyone turned to for advice. We had nowhere to go. We had lost our directions.

My uncle didn't want a funeral, but my family needed the pilgrimage. *If there wasn't a funeral it wasn't real.* Though Gramel and I had still given each other the silent treatment, none of it, the rumors and hurt pride, seemed to matter anymore. My mom, John, stepdad, Gramel and I packed up my family's 6-in-the-evening-blue minivan and made the trip from Florida to Missouri where Uncle Thom lived with his partner. We drove about 17 hours in our minivan, but Gramel just needed a few minutes in her son's bedroom. As she took a step off Uncle Thom's doorstep into the furious sunlight, she lost her balance. *He had battled cancer, but was healthy, from what I knew; he had more time.* Fell to the ground and unforgiving reality hit her. *The weight of his house, memories: the realization I lost my best friend.* She cried and cried and cried her cheeks flushed with tears and no mother should have to bury a child.

*

Rocky Horror was campy and messy and brilliant. But mostly campy. Red lipstick and time warps and black fishnets. As the movie ends the drama gets ramped up and Dr. Frank N Furter gets confronted by his former space cronies. Before his untimely ray-gun-type end, he sings "I'm Going Home" with lyrics: *Cause I've seen blue skies through the tears/In my eyes/And I realize... I'm going home.* I hadn't known when to throw the rice or toast, but I felt Frank N Furter in this song. It'd taken a while, but I'd gone back home, too. After my uncle died and I graduated college, we lived together in Gramel's house *Grey Gardens*-style for over a year, but I'd since moved out of state. During my year home, we'd watched a lot of TV, her favorite programs

Dancing with the Stars and anything on the Food Network. We hadn't talked much about our year-long cold-shoulder of each other, but when my boyfriend came to visit, she told me he could stay in the house. He wasn't allowed to stay in my room, though, because we weren't married. I knew then Gramel had just needed some time to pray and I needed time to learn how to keep my smart mouth closed and listen.

The theater lights came on, and Gramel gripped my arm to get steadied. At 71, Gramel may have been the oldest person to ever see *Rocky Horror* at the theater. On the way out of the theater, the woman who had played Janet walked up to us and told us we were really cool. Gramel smiled and told her how much fun she had. We synchronized into a joint gait and walked to the car. Gramel's fall on Uncle Thom's doorstep and a subsequent fall years later on her own doorstep had caused her to undergo knee surgery. I worried about her and the times I wasn't there to hold onto her, which was so much more often than not. We had solidified an arm-in-arm approach because we walked together so often. Gramel held onto my arm, and I gripped the prop bag we had bought for a dollar. Mom had told me when she was a teenager Uncle Thom had taken her to see *Rocky Horror*. I imagined the two of them together, both with teased 80s hair and some sort of spandex ensemble. I bet they knew all the right things to do during the show.

"This was one of my most fun birthdays," Gramel said as she unlocked the car.

My cape nearly dragged on the ground. I had taken off my wig because it itched but not my Liza-brunch getup because I looked fly in it. When I came out, I worried my grandmother would Bible-thump me. The Southern Baptists had taught me well. Now, I wore her brooch and wig and looked like the inside of her armoire.

"None of my friends would have gone to see this with me," she said. "I'm glad you were home so we could do it together."

Rocky Horror made me realize how lucky I was Gramel wanted me to be myself around her. It was nearly 2 o'clock in the morning, but I felt wide awake.

On Disappointment: “Life’s tough – get a helmet.”

*

Graceland Deferred

At a stoplight in Memphis, seven hours after leaving New Orleans, my roommate and I idled next to a nineties-style, three-windowed white limousine with Elvis Presley’s profile outlined on its side door. The King’s face pointed toward a small, blue wall lined with silver block letters that spelled out Elvis Presley Boulevard, the street’s official name since 1971. On the corner stood a visitors’ center, which looked more like a bowling alley than any type of official state building. The boulevard stretched on in the distance, parallel lines of fast food joints and car dealerships, until we saw the Heartbreak Hotel. After the Presley-faced limo sped away, we drove by the singer’s former home, which was closed for the evening. But we weren’t disappointed: The next morning, we were going to Graceland.

In the late eighties, Paul Simon sang, “I’m going to Graceland / For reasons I cannot explain.” He’s not the only one. Each year, nearly six hundred thousand Elvis fans buy tickets to tour the grounds where the King is buried. The property, a 13.8-acre estate, with a twenty-three room mansion, racquetball court, a car museum, and an archives studio, was purchased in 1957 for reportedly just over a hundred thousand dollars. Twenty years later, at the age of forty-two, Presley died there; his then-fiancée Ginger Alden found him unconscious on the bathroom floor. After his death, relatives, like his aunt, moved into Graceland, and five years later, his ex-wife Priscilla opened it up for public tours. In 1993, his daughter, Lisa Marie, inherited the property, which is now a designated National Historic Landmark.

A day at Graceland can cost almost as much as one at Disney World. Tours start at thirty-six dollars and run as high as seventy-seven. Each package comes with a self-guided iPad tour narrated by *Full House*'s own rocker-uncle John Stamos. After my roommate and I discussed our options, we landed on the forty-five-dollar platinum tour package, which included access to Presley's airplane collection and an "Archive Experience," basically a presentation of rare artifacts from the vaults, given by an actual human. The mid-price package meant we'd forgo "front-of-the-line mansion access," but we wanted to save money for souvenirs.

On a recent first date, a guy told me he owned an Elvis cookbook. "Elvis loved pie," he said. "The book contains some of his favorite recipes." There was no follow-up date, but his Presley fandom lead me to some of the weirder fan merchandise. An Ebay search for "Elvis" returned nearly two hundred thousand hits: a commemorative pocket knife, a *G.I. Blues* Christmas teddy bear set, and Sun Studio collector's plates galore. Presley is printed on money, stamps, patches, magazines, and photo albums. His image is on items ranging from beach towels to a Monopoly board to a homemade-looking piece of "clay art" selling for eighty dollars. When I told my mom about my Graceland plans, she asked me to buy her Elvis-themed salt-and-pepper shakers. I hoped to find them at "Graceland Crossing," a Presley shopping center we passed before we turned into the parking lot of our hotel, the Days Inn at Graceland.

Lit up by a neon guitar near the entrance, the hotel's lobby was a shrine to Presley mania: Mock-gold records lined the walls, while a statue, mouth open, mid-song, stood next to a wood table cluttered by framed photos of him. A giant portrait, the most handsome image in the lobby, hung behind the counter to greet visitors, while a white bust kept the front desk worker company. I paid for our sixty-five-dollar room and walked by a poster board covered in purple flowers to commemorate Presley's recent eightieth birthday. From our balcony, I could see the guitar-

shaped pool in the courtyard, and what I am pretty sure was one of Presley's old planes, permanently grounded next to the Heartbreak Hotel. By the pool was a mural of Las Vegas, where Presley played residences, wed Priscilla, and now marries couples for about two hundred dollars.

Before I crawled into bed, I studied the room's photos of Presley at different phases of his life. In Presley canon, his career changes are often placed in four shorthand categories: the early "Hound Dog" years; the movie years (he made thirty-one films); the concert years (signaled by the 1968 television broadcast of *Elvis*, widely known as the '68 *Comeback Special* because it marked Presley's return from a ten-year performing hiatus); and the "Viva Las Vegas" jumpsuit years. In one of my room's photos, he wore a uniform to commemorate his years of service in the army. In another, he was decked out in a white jump suit, grabbing a microphone stand. Next to it was a photo of him lounging in a Hawaiian shirt; this Elvis watched over me as I drifted off to sleep.

*

I had wanted to find an Elvis impersonator—or "Elvis Tribute Artist" as they prefer to be called—but a hotel worker told us we'd come during the "off season." There are an estimated eighty-five thousand ETAs around the world, but apparently, none live in Memphis full-time. The hotel worker said that during "the season," which coincides with Elvis Week, a ten-day celebration in mid-August, flyers for ETA performances clutter the hotel lobby's windows. Competitive ETAs flock to the city to compete in the "Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest" in hopes of winning twenty thousand dollars, a contract to perform with Legends in Concert, and the distinction of being the "best representation of the legacy of Elvis Presley." To qualify, an

ETA must win a preliminary round held at one of nineteen earlier competitions sanctioned by Elvis Presley Enterprises—an organization created by “The Elvis Presley Trust” to handle official Presley and Graceland business—which take place in cities like Presley’s birthplace of Tupelo, Mississippi, Ontario, Canada and Lancashire, England.

With so many ETAs out there, only a select few can make a living off of the craft. In 2012, thirty-year-old Victor Trevino, Jr., placed second in the big competition, which scores contenders based on their vocals (forty percent), style (twenty percent), stagewear (twenty percent) and presence (twenty percent). In a YouTube clip from that year’s performance, Trevino walks on stage to screaming fans, wearing a fifteen-hundred-dollar gold jacket. Before he starts singing “It’s Now or Never,” he smirks, perfectly mimicking Presley’s half-lip curl. When he sings, his voice hits a similar treble and vibrato that matches the King’s later vocal stylings; if you close your eyes, you almost forget how young Trevino is. As a full-time tribute artist since 2007, he’s performed internationally in countries such as Sweden and Spain, where he did a week-run of a show that portrays Presley’s different eras. “They really like the shows in foreign countries,” he told me. “He never really got to do any full-blown concerts in foreign countries.” On Gigmasters.com, a booking site for impersonators, his rates now range from two hundred and fifty to twenty-five hundred dollars per hour.

When Trevino was in college, someone suggested he start performing as Elvis. He eventually competed in a Legends concert in Branson, Missouri, where he was scouted by managers who booked him for *Elvis Lives*, a touring show formatted as a “musical journey” of Presley’s career from the earliest Sun Studios years to the ‘68 *Comeback Special*. The iconic black leather suit of the *Comeback Special* is most comfortable for Trevino to portray, because of his youthful look. He told me that a respectful tribute artist knows how to have an authentic

character on stage; he also doesn't "particularly like" the way he looks in a jumpsuit, Presley's iconic later-career uniform. "There's some people who constantly think they're Elvis," he said. "It's the weirdest thing. I don't care for those kind of people."

Along with *Elvis Lives* and *Legends*, Trevino also occasionally stars in a show called "A Night to Remember," which pays homage to the Million Dollar Quartet, a 1956 Presley jam session that included Johnny Cash. The impromptu set was recorded by Jack Clement, who, Trevino says, asked him to record original music when they performed together in Europe. While he never followed up with Clement, who died in 2013, Trevino still works on some of his own music. Mostly though, he wants to honor the King's legacy. "Elvis wasn't the first rock 'n' roller, but he was the most important," he said. "His music not only changed America, it changed the world."

The day after arriving in Memphis, I woke up early to hit the continental breakfast. As I made my way to the free eggs and waffles, I noticed small ice patches. "How charming," I thought, "there's a little bit of snow on the ground." At the breakfast nook, I grabbed coffee and sat at a table with fifteen other Elvis early-birds, older people who wore mostly white t-shirts and talked quietly amongst themselves. Their eyes slowly began gravitating toward the TV. A newscaster was announcing that schools and businesses would shut down for the winter weather. "They'd never close Graceland," I thought. "That'd be just so wrong and un-American."

One of the other breakfast eaters, who sat beside a cardboard cut-out of a young Presley, called Graceland. Then, she delivered the bad news. It had shut down for the day. "We came all the way from Winnipeg," said a woman at a nearby table. We had started breakfast as strangers, but now we bonded through our grief. In Februarys, the mansion is closed on Tuesdays, and the

weatherman predicted worse weather for Wednesday. “Graceland may be closed for weeks,” one of my fellow breakfast mourners said. “We may never get to see it.”

*

Three days later, in New Orleans, after I recounted my failed Graceland endeavors, a friend mentioned the Krewe of the Rolling Elvi, a group of men who dress up as Elvis and ride scooters in a Mardi Gras parade. I’d seen them roll the previous year and remembered their sparkly jumpsuits, Elvis wigs, and sunglasses. They had ridden glowing bikes through a line of outstretched hands. This year, the Krewe counted a hundred and nineteen “rolling members” and thirty-five “Memphis Mafia,” guys who were basically auditioning for full-fledged membership in the Krewe. There were also twenty-five Priscillas, a “lady’s auxiliary” who wore big buns to resemble the King’s ex-wife. Graceland may be the epicenter of the Presley universe, but his fans live everywhere.

On the Friday after Mardi Gras, I walked to a crawfish boil to meet the thirty-one-year-old Krewe captain Tim Clements. While he chatted with some people, I noticed how he looked strikingly like the sixties, *Elvis is Back!*-album Presley. Though his Gmail icon had shown him in full Presley gear, I hadn’t expected such a strong resemblance—he could pass as the King’s distant cousin. “When you see a group of Elvi riding their scooters,” he said, between bites of the season’s first crawfish batch, “it’s the coolest thing in the world.”

As a kid, Clement’s sister listened to New Kids on the Block, but he played Presley songs like “Return to Sender” and “Teddy Bear.” In 2007, he first witnessed the Rolling Elvi—a term, he says, is the grammatically correct plural of “Elvis”—a sighting which proved monumental. “It was the greatest frickin’ thing I’d ever seen in my life,” he said. “If there’s anything I love more

than Elvis, it's Mardis Gras, so the Krewe was made for me." But it wasn't easy for him to join the organization; they wouldn't return his emails. One day, he noticed a guy wearing a Rolling Elvi shirt, and the guy told him about an annual Presley death-day party that many Krewe members attend. Clements dressed in a jumpsuit and hopped on his Vespa to hit up the party. He hounded the Krewe until they let him in, mostly, he says, because he naturally had "the sideburns" to go with the costume.

Before he joined in 2009, the Krewe mostly met on Presley's birthday and death-day parties. In costume, they all introduced themselves as Elvis, so they didn't really *know* each other. He decided to organize different functions and at these events, he says, he'd see members for the first time "without their sunglasses or hair." As the organization grew, charities asked members to perform at events. Eight or ten guys, he says, now make regular appearances. There's even a section of the Krewe called "The Jailhouse Rockers," which works on their dance steps for these functions.

But Mardis Gras remains the biggest event of the season. They ride in the massive Krewe of Muses parade, which features over a thousand riding members and the all-female Muses. In 2011, Clements, dressed in full-on Presley gear, and re-created his wedding proposal during the parade. He had a blinking ring for a throw (items members toss from floats), and he gave his wife one "to put next to her real ring." It was also the first year, he says, his scooter did not break down during the ride.

Before I left the boil, Clements told me to check out Clockwork Elvis, fronted by a man he considers the "hands-down best" Presley singer in New Orleans. The band happened to be playing a gig at a bar within walking distance of my house, so a few hours later, I went and listened to Clockwork Elvis's funkified rendition of "Hound Dog." The voice was as good as

Clements said; it sounded like an updated version of Presley, confident and raspy, yet somehow still melodic. Multi-colored Christmas lights hung from the ceiling to help light the stage as the band played Presley songs in alphabetical order (their choice to organize the night's set). About twenty people, a few more than who'd earlier mourned with me when Graceland closed, convened with the King's spirit at the eccentric neighborhood bar. A gray-haired man in a button-up shirt bobbed his head in a corner booth. A college couple drank Coronas while a tipsy woman, feeling the music, shakily danced.

Clockwork Elvis formed back in 2001 at the suggestion of a bar owner who wanted an Elvis band to play at his parties. While the band had kind of started as a joke, they realized they had fun playing together, and, after a few solid shows, people asked them to perform at different functions, like an all-expenses-paid trip to play at a wedding in Hawaii. (The couple, however, separated less than two weeks before their nuptials.) After a few years of being called "The Elvis Band," they changed to their current name to avoid becoming "just be another tribute band." The band decided to juxtapose Presley with Alex DeLarge from *Clockwork Orange* to show how both were "fictional characters" in their own right; their lead singer DC Harbold now regularly wears a *Clockwork* hat.

During the band's set break, Harbold smoked a cigarette at the bar. I told him I'd just come from Memphis, but I couldn't bring myself to mention that we didn't make it into Graceland. When most people think of Presley, they imagine rhinestones, over the top costumes, sideburns, rambling, and scarf-throwing. But Harbold, who manages No Fun, a comic book store, by day, wears jeans and a short-sleeve shirt. At times, he sings with a cigarette loosely hanging from his lips. The exaggeration of impersonators, he says, has more to do with the iconography of American pop culture than the musician. "We've lionized Elvis and canonized

him to the point of being a twentieth-century American Jesus,” he said. “Elvis was a real person who grew up just like the rest of us, but had a talent and was in the right place at the right time.”

Harbold says that Presley’s legacy is music that’s “young, dangerous, sexual, and unexpected,” but people expect the over-affectation of Elvis. He thinks that it’s a “mockery” for people to just associate Presley with wardrobe. “He liked dressing up and liked cool suits,” he said, “but the bulk of his career had nothing to do with jumpsuits.” Still, he admits that the get-ups are more fun to wear, because “guys love wearing onesies, man.”

While Clockwork Elvis played a country-meets-soul version of “G.I. Blues,” my favorite song from the movie of the same name, I realized I was glad my trip to Graceland didn’t work out: I wouldn’t have heard this if I had made it to the mansion. Though he died thirty-seven years ago, Presley’s fans keep him alive. As Harbold belted out the “G.I. Blue’s” lyric, “We’d like to be heroes, but all we do here is march,” I thought about Presley’s small-town, Mississippi roots. He never could have dreamed people would portray him for a living—his legacy is some type of great, hallucinatory American Dream, and it seems like we won’t be waking up from it anytime soon.

[present]

On Cool: “There are so many different definitions of cool. It’s a state of mind.”

*

A First Day Snapshot of Middle School Cool

The August sun made me squint as I tried to get a better angle for a photo of my eleven-year-old brother John on his first day of middle school. We stood in the school’s parking lot, aged by decades of kids who wore the Florida-standard of flip flops and camouflage cargo shorts. Mom adjusted her sunglasses and put her arm around John in the affectionate yet protective way only a momma bear can.

“Be cool,” John said.

No more pictures – a hug with our bleach-blond Mom, his best pose, a selfie with me. He had called me “old” earlier in the week and now he hinted I was approaching *uncool* territory. He’s fifteen years younger than I am but thinks he know better than me. I had grown up an only child. Mom divorced my dad when I was two years old, the two of us lived together in a series of small apartments and one bedroom houses—one of which stood so close to railroad tracks it shook when a train passed. I remember we’d stand under moonlight and wave at trains she told me carried animals to the circus. Around the time I turned 15, Mom pulled a *Brady Bunch* and married man who had three daughters. About nine months after the wedding, Mom we gone into labor with John during one of my high school basketball games. I imagined the new baby would help me bond with my new sisters. But this didn’t become a reality. And I constantly fought with my stepdad over the foreign concept of *curfew*. Because I’m so much older than John I feel more like a brother-father than just a brother. I no longer lived in my home state—or abided by any curfew—but I came back to visit my family as much as possible. John’s first day in middle

school was one I definitely could not miss. I needed to give him a hard time as any good big brother would on such an occasion. The sun continued to beat down on us, so I found the perfect angle and sneaked in one last photo before we made our way inside.

The school had sent Mom a list of approved dress code: shirts without words, no jeans, no flip flops. If students broke dress code, they could get sent home for the day. I bet parents avoided this outcome by threats like they'd say "swag" or "YOLO" or some other teenage slang in front of their kid's friends. John wore a neon green polo shirt with khaki shorts that stopped just below his knees. He squinted just like I did in the sun, but his tan made me jealous. Both he and mom tanned liked good Floridians. Because Mom tanned deep and rich, my friend asked me if any part of my family descended from the Middle East. I on the other hand remained pale as the coast is long. John usually liked for me to run gel through his surfer-long hair when we wanted to feel fancy, but we didn't put any hair product in that morning. Fancy wasn't *cool* in middle school. He rocked cool shoes, grey Nikes, the check mark swoosh outlined in bright green and black. The grey laces stayed thick and tight. He hadn't yet mastered the art of tying shoelaces on his own. But he tried.

Mom and I walked behind John. This would've been a perfect time to catch some action shots, but I didn't want to embarrass him. We gave him a few paces to strut his big boy stuff without the paparazzi camera flashes of my cellphone. He stopped to give students high-fives at the school's front doors.

"What's up bro," he said.

He pounded knuckles with another kid. Gramel called him the "Little Mayor" on account of his ability to talk to everyone without self-consciousness. She also said he sounded like a "New Yorker" when he called people "bro." I thought he sounded more dude than New Yorker,

but in a Venn diagram of the dude spectrum, I'd compromise and put him somewhere near New Jersey, close to the Shore.

"Those two boys wouldn't even look at John when he tried to talk to them," Mom said to me as we entered the school.

"It's probably because they're the older kids," I said. "Older kids never talk to the younger ones. It's not cool."

A woman at our church had said she could tell he had Down syndrome because of his "Mongolian" features. *Bitch*, Mom had muttered when it was just the two of us. Down syndrome is an intellectual disability caused by an extra either partial or full copy of chromosome 21. The condition means, among other things, that John's cognitive abilities are somewhat impaired. According to the National Down Syndrome Society: "One in every 691 babies in the United States is born with Down syndrome, making Down syndrome the most common genetic condition." Before John was born, I don't think anyone in my family knew someone who had Down syndrome. Mom had attended support groups and found other moms who gave her encouragement. We'd learn people with Down syndrome grow up to hold down jobs and live independently. My family hoped for all these things (minus the MMA fights) for John, but there was still no way to prepare us for his early health complications.

John had been born with an irregular heartbeat. Two weeks after his birth the doctors cut down his soft belly for open heart surgery. I didn't see him hooked up to the machines, because I couldn't handle it. My uncle threw up when they wheeled John past him. About two years later, he had to have another open heart surgery. A rope-thick scar runs from near his sternum to belly button. He prefers a shirtless life. I tell him the scar makes him look tough. It dances when he laughs at his own jokes. John's eyes are so blue, a cloudless Florida day, so when the church-

woman had said “she could tell” I didn’t really know what she meant. But, over the years, I had noticed the *get-away-from-me* looks given to my brother at places like the beach and the arcade where he always beat me at *Soul Calibur*. A woman at a circus once said: “Aren’t they just the sweetest people? Nothing ever bothers them. It’s like they are just here to smile and make other people smile.” I almost bit her head off and yelled *John’s not a clown -- he’s a person with a full range of emotions and that’s not cool to say* but I just smiled. I took a cue from John, because if arcade players gave him a *get-away-from-me* look, he just tried to give them a high-five.

Mom had a point, though. In his new middle school there were popular kids and puberty, two things he didn’t deal with at his integrated elementary school two miles away. He had gone to the elementary school since he was a baby. He played soccer on the P.E. field and painted pictures. He participated in field days and learned some sign language to help kids in his class who couldn’t speak. His sixth grade class would be with other kids who had special needs, but, from what I understood, they would interact with the rest of the middle school during P.E. and lunch – two of the most popularity-ridden periods of the day. *You can’t play with us*, I imagined kids saying. *Go sit with someone else*. If something were to happen would he be able to understand mean remarks and tell us about bullies at school?

“Those boys who ignored him had writing on their shirts,” Mom said as we walked through the middle school building. “They’re out of dress code.”

Inside, a million kids, all probably hopped up on Pixy Stix and bootlegged coffee, blurred into one constant line of pink and orange. Screeches of their shoes rang in my ears. The school mascot was a tiger for a reason; these kids went to school in the jungle. I liked the open air hallways, because they let in some good sunlight and a breeze. Very peaceful, if no one else

walked the halls. The courtyard made me think of the school on Nickelodeon's show *Victorious*, which John and I watched together.

"My locker," John said in front of a red locker.

The best way I've figured out how to describe John's speech pattern is to say he has a heavy tongue. He sometimes sounds as though he's under water. I occasionally need him to repeat his sentence a few times for me to get it, but he knows the words, even if it takes me a while. Mom and I tried to get John to move away from the locker. He wanted one almost more than anything else in the world, but his teacher had told us he wouldn't get one. When we asked his teacher to explain the locker situation, she had said that in his classroom they used a coat rack for backpacks. These students would never get a locker of their own. She didn't say this, but I thought he couldn't have a locker because combinations were hard to remember. The locks too difficult. I had a PO Box for nearly two months and never memorized its combination, so I understood why he couldn't have a locker, but it still made me go on a mini-rant in my head. *You gotta at least let him try*, I thought. *It's the only way to know if he could do it or not.*

Professionals described John as "high-functioning." To me, high-functioning meant we held extensive conversations about topics like music, televisions, and his favorite sport basketball. He likes LeBron James while I prefer Derrick Rose. We root for different teams. It's OK, though, we're family – actually it's not OK, GO BULLS. He also likes to ask "hot" girls to marry him. Though he leaves out some letters in words, he's a great talker. He just doesn't listen as well as he talks. We're trying to work with him on "turning on" his ears. This was one of those times I needed his ears to be on full volume. He wouldn't let the locker-thing go. He had watched enough *Victorious* to know most big kids get lockers at school. He wouldn't budge.

In his main classroom, the teacher had placed John's blue name tag at the back left of the

classroom. He sat next to the oldest boy in the class. Out of all the other names, John's was the only one to have a yellow sheet of paper that said **Remember !!!!! J Keep your hands to yourself!!**. His elementary school reputation of not understanding certain personal boundaries preceded him. John recognized (read: read) a few of the notecard names. The most notable was a boy, whom I'll call Greg. Gramel had described Greg as "Oh, yes, the biter" to John's teacher at orientation a few days earlier. At that orientation I had introduced myself to all his classroom aides and the Jane Lynch lookalike who lead PE, John's favorite time of day. We'd also heard a whole anti-bullying spiel led by the stocky but tough campus officer. To the Gramel's biter remark, John's teacher had laughed a polite little kitten laugh teachers learn in graduate school. Then, Gramel went on with her life as a little-old-lady who says whatever she wants and doesn't wake up early if she can help it, which was why she was absent on John's first day.

Without Gramel to say any biter-remarks to make him behave, John started to re-arrange the seating assignments. He put himself by a kid from his elementary school. He apparently didn't want to sit next to someone he didn't know, so he placed his name next to a friend. *Fair enough*. Mom's ocean eyes got big as we both watched him move the name cards. I stayed back. I didn't know if I should step in and tell him to "be good" or let him get reprimanded by his teacher. I think this is where the brother-father feeling comes in the most, because I have to actually discipline him. Mom had also asked me if I'd be John's caretaker when she dies. I wanted to tell her *I need you to be around forever for me, because I'm awful at dating and don't know how to cook or organize things like you do and you give me great advice*. Instead, I gave her a hug. I'd prepared myself for this question for a while. "Of course," I had said, "I'm his brother. You didn't need to ask." In the classroom, I watched John put down another name tag.

He didn't back look at me. I got the feeling he knew he shouldn't move the nametags, but that he was going to do it anyway.

This semi-rebellious nature was not new to me or anyone else who had gone to the arcade with John. One time during a particularly intense game he called me a "butthead" and immediately apologized after the word came out of his mouth. His admittance of guilt was a sure sign of premeditation in my mind. I knew he knew what he knew and he knew I knew he knew. At around five or six years old, John had tested as being 2 to 2 ½ years behind most children his age on correlation questions, the identifications of shapes, and motor skills. At 11, he could spell his name, trace words, and knew color names. If he'd been marked off on these tests because he didn't "stay in the lines" while he colored, I'm to blame. For years he'd seen me color with an "abstract" approach – around the borders, a bunch of lines – and I'd seen him start to mimic my artistic flare when we colored together at the kitchen table. We went on with our discussions about LeBron vs. Derrick Rose and the different high school characters on *Victorious*. He also patted my head and said, "It's all right" at times when I needed to hear it like when I didn't get to choose the restaurant we went to for dinner.

Still, I wanted his new teacher to know he was capable; that he was more than a *get-away-from-me* look. I watched the teacher walk over to John as he decided where to put the next name tag. She talked to him in a firm voice – the kind teachers learn along with their polite kitten laughs. He could listen, and I thought he could understand what she said. He was a middle schooler, though, and no matter if they have an intellectual disability or not, middle schoolers push boundaries just because they can.

Soon the other kids in his class started to file in from off the bus, which had pulled up near the back entrance. He'd ride the same bus for the rest of the year. We'd driven him on his

first day to make sure we knew the lay of the land. His classmates hung their backpacks on the coat rack instead of in a locker. Mom told John it was time for her and me to go. I thought he would cry, something he usually did when family left, but he walked over to the other kids. I didn't try to give him a hug in front of his new classmates. I didn't want him to look *uncool*.

John approached a towhead boy, a bit taller than John and who also had Down syndrome. John looked up at him; it seemed like they sized each other up for a moment. Three years of middle school lockers and potential *get-away-from-me* looks bunched in my stomach. What if his classmates didn't like him? There were no big brothers like me in the classroom. The Little Mayor reached out his hand to introduce himself. My concern subsided a little. *He can do this*, I thought. The tall boy smiled before he shook John's hand. I wanted to take a picture but stopped myself as the two boys laughed like they'd been cool with each other forever.

On Insecurity: “Be the thing you admire. You’ll find that this ‘thing’ will eventually change.”

*

A John Wayne Voice

When I was little I hated my voice more than anything else in the world.

A boy on the playground yelled, “You sound like a girl!” and even as a young kid I knew he meant gay. My voice, a mockingbird, soared into the clouds, and I wanted to shoot it down. “Please God,” I’d pray at night, “let my voice get so low people make fun of me for how deep it is.”

I tried to talk less gay, but I ended up just talking less.

A Leviticus-type code of conduct set out by my Southern Baptist high school forbade “secular activities.” Homosexuality, or even the hint of same-sex thoughts, equaled expulsion. When my tenth-grade English teacher nicknamed me “Skittles,” like the candy, I smelled danger. Maybe I read too much into it. But my teacher pronounced the word as *Sssss-kittles*, with a special lisp, and the candy’s tagline does read “Taste the Rainbow.”

When I asked my English teacher why he’d given me this nickname, he said I reminded him of the rapper Eminem, which sounded like M&Ms. This was also the mid-2000s, and I had never met an at-home bleaching kit I didn’t like. Puberty came, and I changed how I spoke: slower and clipped. Senior year, a different Southern Baptist teacher would tell me my voice went from “ghetto-sounding back to gay.”

My English teacher kept lisping *Ssssss-kittles* in front of everyone, and I felt as though he knew my secret, which I'd end up keeping hidden for years. I tried my best to put both eternal damnation and my nickname on the back-burner and just get through high school.

*

Paula Cole's "Where Have All The Cowboys Gone?" peaked at number 8 on the Billboard charts in 1997. That was the year I turned ten, and I listened to Cole's jam on the radio and thought I wanted to be a cowboy and have a John Wayne for myself. Someone with a tough, unassailable name. But what were the odds that the name would match the cowboy? My main problem in terms of finding my man—aside from the fact I was 10 years old and Southern Baptist—was that I knew he'd likely be hiding. If John Wayne wasn't named John Wayne, how much longer would it take us to pick him out of a crowd?

Before John Wayne was John Wayne, he went by his legal name, Marion Morrison. Once he got his big break, he changed it, but years later he would still reference himself in interviews in third person as The Duke, a nickname bestowed on him and a family pet. After the name change, Wayne went on to star in a record number of leading roles: 142, according to IMBD. In the opening scene of his 1971 movie *Big Jake* Wayne spurs his horse up to a Scottish sheep herder. Men on horses surround the Scot, still alive with noose around his neck. He's about to get hanged. He's wearing a faded peach shirt, tan cowboy hat, and suspenders. There's no fear in his sky-line blue eyes.

Wayne's voice booms: desert thirsty and stretching generations. "You gonna cut him down?"

In “John Wayne: A Love Song,” Joan Didion wrote that when he spoke “there was no mistaking his intentions.”

*

In my early twenties I went through a brief period when I tried to go by the name “Brick.”

In my life I had only ever met one Brick, and she came in the form of a red-headed, take-no-BS lesbian I admired greatly. Brick and I met at a recreational club and spoke little to each other; she intimidated me in a been-there-done-that way. From corners I studied how people looked at her, held her gaze and stood a little straighter when she gave them any kind of attention. Everyone liked her. I wanted to be cool like her. I liked how her name ended in a strong K, kicked from the back of my throat. Changing my nickname, I thought, would give me confidence.

But saying “Hi, I’m Brick” made me feel silly and fake. I hadn’t fully committed, and anyway I couldn’t live up to the real predecessor, the Brick from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* who drinks too much and fights with his wife Maggie (who is, of course, the cat). Brick’s friend Skipper has recently killed himself, because, as goes a common interpretation, the two men shared an intimate relationship they felt needed to stay hidden.

Throughout the play Brick talks about the lies people build for themselves and their relationships. In an emotional scene Brick states, “Mendacity is a system that we live in. Liquor is one way out an’ death’s the other.”

I couldn’t call myself a Brick. I graduated from high school 50 years after *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* won Williams the Pulitzer, and away from my honors English teacher’s taunts of Ssssss-kittles I started to realize people like me didn’t have to spend our lives this way. I left the name behind. I turned 24 and moved to Chicago.

*

According to an internet message board Tom Waits “used to scream into a pillow in an effort to make his voice more raspy. He also drank whisky.”

Another poster says, “Other than Sulphur Hexafluoride there isn’t much that will actually lower your voice, although throat infections and smoking will make it more grizzled.” Take “shooters” of cold vodka in order to freeze your “freakin’ vocal cords.”

“I think you need to be clearer about what you mean by ‘deepening,’” a dream-killing poster writes. “If you want to lower your pitch, sorry, you’re out of luck. That would mean increasing the mass of your vocal cords somehow, and you can’t really do that. Harsh screaming will lower your pitch, but that’s because your vocal cords get abused and swollen. It’s not too good for them.”

The Surgeon General would probably warn against taking such drastic measures from an internet message board. I’m a child of the ‘90s, though, so it’s my go-to method.

Some time ago a friend told me I couldn’t get a John Wayne growl because I was lazy. “The problem with people in your generation is that they don’t want to work for anything,” he said. “Back in the day people would change things they didn’t like about themselves.”

After my message board search, I decided to stick to my tried-and-true method of simply convincing myself that my voice didn’t suck. As an uninsured part-time employee of a museum in Chicago, I had to consider the cost of medical bills if my vocal cords collapsed.

*

After a year of working at this museum, a better position opened in a different department. The only problem: the job description included giving five-to-seven minute “fun” presentations in front of an IMAX movie theater audience of 314 judgmental people.

The museum classified this movie theater gig as “permanent,” which meant an upgrade to insurance, and my money situation made me too broke to acknowledge self-consciousness. When the manager asked me how I felt about giving presentations, I said something like, “It’s no problem. I got this.”

I successfully pretended to be cool and casual. Three people auditioned, I got hired, and I got up on stage and spoke.

No one told me our movie theater boss would sporadically critique our performances, but every once in a while he’d pull us aside and give us pointers. His criteria included audience engagement, voice clarity, and the strength of our science-related facts. I remember him telling me during my first critique that, even though I wore a microphone, I needed to speak up and project my voice.

When you’ve always hated your voice the last thing you want to hear is “speak up.” What if the middle school boys made fun of me as I was them about weather before the showing of *Tornado Alley*?

Hearing my voice every day didn’t make me like it any better. At best, I got used to it, and often, right before a presentation, I’d feel transported back to my *what-if-the-middle-school-kids-know-I’m-gay* anxiety. But I realized that hardly anyone paid attention to the before-movie presentation anyway, and more importantly, that no one was paying attention as closely as I was. I never needed my playground retorts: most people at least golf-clapped when I finished my

spiel. And after about 100 presentations, I developed a routine full of pop cultural references. Kids love a good top-40 music mention. I learned the trick: delivery, delivery, delivery.

I may never have a booming John Wayne voice or get called a menacing nickname like Brick. But I started to realize that, if someone handed me a microphone, I needed to make the most of it, and could.

On Religion: “Pray for people who have hurt you.”

*

Sing It Loud

One of the best places to sing in public is during a church service. I grew up a Southern Baptist, and had learned no matter how shrill or off-key your voice may be, a good worship leader will still call it an “instrument of God” and instruct you to sing louder. On a Sunday morning in June, I sat in my 72-year-old grandmother’s Florida living room as she sang worship songs with a televised congregation. She wore a floral t-shirt with “Fresh” printed on the front, a starfish necklace, and hunter green basketball shorts. Insomnia made this TV church a preferable option to early morning services for my berry-haired grandmother. It was the Sunday after the Supreme Court ruled 5 to 4 in favor of Marriage Equality, and I prepared myself for the preacher to mention the decision. The pastor of my former church had penned an “Open Letter” in which he said the church wouldn’t acknowledge the marriage ruling, because his congregation “cannot and will not affirm the moral acceptability of homosexual behavior.” Gramel had reacted differently. When I asked her if she’d attend my potential gay wedding, she had said, “Sure, if I’m still alive by the time you decide to get into a relationship. I don’t plan to live forever.” As I waited for the pastor’s judgment, the church’s singers began to impress me. The Hour of Power soloists sounded Broadway-worthy. The singers’ notes filled the room and reminded me of the many years I’d spent in churches before I came out of the closet and felt banned from them.

The camera panned out to show audience members at the megachurch, similar to the Southern Baptist one of my childhood. I went to school in the same building as my home church, which offered kindergarten through twelfth grade. I went to this Southern Baptist school for the

entirety of my primary education. The school taught Creationism and debunked evolution with logic such as *if the Earth was older than 6,000 or so years, there'd be more dust on the moon* [Quick Note: Do not even try to understand this logic.] We took Bible class every day and attended chapel once a week. I consistently dominated “Sword Drills,” a competitive activity in which people try to find Bible passages the fastest. Along with an educational curriculum centered on the Bible, the school was, of course, extremely conservative. Administration considered dancing a sin, because it promoted impure thoughts. At the beginning of each high school year, students signed a book-length code of conduct which outlined appropriate behavior such as boys must stand “six inches away” from girls and no one could use the Lord’s name in vain. Homosexuality equaled an immediate expulsion. I once saw a teacher forcibly removed from the classroom by security due to his rumored sexuality. Back then, I desperately tried to pray away the gay, but it hadn’t worked.

At 28 years old, I had mostly made peace with my views on religion. In college, I took a Literature of the Bible course in which I re-read the book as a text. This class had made me realize that for most of my life I’d been internalizing interpretations from teachers and pastors without reading the actual words. When I looked at the stories outside of a religious context, I understood the Bible’s morality to be a bit more fluid. My new look at the Bible led me to talk to theologians and Bible scholars, most of whom seemed adamant that homosexuality would not send me to eternal damnation. I could then intellectually separate my faith from an institution which had tried to make me feel unworthy. Throughout this whole process, I still *felt* like a Christian. A side effect of religious indoctrination is that I never questioned my belief in God. I just didn’t feel comfortable at church around people who thought I would burn in hell.

In the company of televangelists at Gramel’s house, though, I sat transfixed.

“There are no strangers,” Gramel belted along with the TV singers. “There are no orphans of God.”

The TV pastor didn’t mentioned the gay marriage ruling, which made sense when I later realized the Hour of Power had been recorded before the Supreme Court’s decision.

*

The Christian TV station ran commercials for The Holy Land Experience (HLE), a Bible-based theme park near Disney World in Orlando. The actual Holy Land sans “Experience” is a sacred area roughly located between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. In 2001, a Minister named Marvin Rosenthal founded The Holy Land Experience in Florida. People scrutinized his endeavor from the time it opened. HLE was reportedly picketed by the Jewish Defense League on its first day of operations. In 2007, Rosenthal sold HLE for \$37 million to Paul Crouch who, back in 1973 along with the heavy-makeup-wearing Tammy Faye Baker, helped co-found the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). This 2007 acquisition led to the park’s expansion and also explained the many HLE commercials that Gramel had seen during her televised singalongs. According to the Holy Land Experience’s website, the park seeks to “demonstrate the living truths of the Bible in innovative ways, through state-of-the-art exhibits, dynamic musical or dramatic performances, and insightful teaching presentations.”

To vary our early-aught Disney vacations, my grandparents had taken my thirteen-year-old brother John and me to The Holy Land Experience about a decade earlier. I don’t remember too much about it except that there were no rides, *maybe* a petting zoo, and I had watched a “passion play.” Passion plays recreate a timeline of Jesus’s life from virgin birth to crucifixion

and resurrection. The Holy Land Experience had been a lot for me to handle as a teen. It's intense to see a man – even if he's an actor – get whipped then hammered to a cross. The portrayal is a reminder of how people have brutalized each other. Parts of the Bible such as the crucifixion can be difficult to read, but the TV evangelists had reminded me how much I actually like certain sections of it. When Gramel told me she wanted to take John and me back to HLE, I helped plan the trip.

*

Gramel instructed John to wear his Crocs sandals, so he could put his LeBron James on his lap and practice tying his shoes. At 13, he tested at the same cognitive abilities of a four-year-old. He could do a lot of things on his own – like tell us how to get the TV off MENU – but he hadn't yet mastered the art of *bunny ear come out of your hole*.

We rode the whole way with all the windows down because the air conditioning was broken and we didn't want to melt. John eventually gave up on his shoes and somehow fell asleep in the back seat. I didn't need to look up directions to HLE, because I'd driven past its gold coliseum, visible from the interstate, many times when I lived within the city limits as a student at the University of Central Florida. HLE is right down the street from Shamu's home of SeaWorld and stands kitty-corner to the 1,118,000 square foot Mall at Millennia in which O-towners get their fix of Gucci and Louis Vuitton. Gramel had wanted to get her “money's worth” and arrive at the Holy Land Experience right when it opened at ten, but I pulled her station wagon past the entrance's angel statues around noon.

A lush, fake-grass replica of the Garden of Eden marked the park's entrance. This garden takes up prime real estate in the Bible. It's the birthplace of humanity and also where Satan

tempts Eve with a piece of fruit. The three of us walked by the fake garden, and I watched a family use their iPad to take pictures next to zebras. Another group of people stood near an elephant that shot a stream of water from its trunk. At the ticket booth, I tried to convince Gramel to say John was 12 so he'd get the cheaper kid's price, but she told me she didn't want to lie.

"Have a blessed day," the man said after Gramel paid \$150 for the three of us.

"Oh, don't worry," she answered. "We will."

*

Our first stop was Solomon's Treasures, a store that offered "1st century shopping" in the form of black, leather belts studded with "Jesus" on the waist, endless versions of the Bible, and \$.50 postcards with images of a bloody actor-Jesus. After we shopped a bit, Gramel sat down under a nearby tent. She was soon deep in conversation with a four-year-old named Bryson. He sat on a stool carved in the shape of a camel. His mother said they had visited Orlando from Mississippi and warned us about The Scriptorium, a 55-minute journey through the history of the Bible, because, "You have to stay the whole time." Bryson asked Gramel if she'd come visit him in Mississippi. He kissed my grandmother on the cheek as a goodbye.

"See you in heaven," Bryson said as he and his mom left us in the tent.

I would have probably said something similar at his age.

"It's nice he's not afraid of death," Gramel said. "You're never too young to learn it kind of sucks here on Earth, but Heaven is our reward." I had no answer for the state of Gramel or Bryson's soul, so I looked at HLE's schedule of events. For what the park lacks in rides, it makes up in live dramas that bring the "Bible to life." The "Sermon on the Mount" looked cool, but we had arrived too late to see it or the unfortunately titled "Four Women Who Loved Jesus."

"What do you guys want to do?" I asked.

“I’m ready to go home,” John said.

We were stuck on the decision between “Baptism with Jesus” and a tour of the “Jerusalem Marketplace.”

“Don’t ask John’s opinion anymore,” Gramel said. “I paid \$50 each for us to get in here, and we’re not gonna leave yet.”

HLE’s aesthetic translates to a glitzy idea ancient Middle East. Park employees rocked ancient costumes. Women wore long robes, some in tattered neutrals and others in turquoise, paisley printed threads accented in gold or silver. As the poetic Yelp reviewer Sarah Jane W. writes: “Everything is coated in gold glitter and fake diamonds, like Jan Crouch [the woman who co-owns HLE] got methed up, cleaned out Michaels, then went on a 72-hour BeDazzler binge.” To Sarah’s description, I’d add: Down every bronze-painted pathway there were white, sexy Roman soldier statues and inexplicably more mirrors than anyone should own. This isn’t a critique of HLE’s aesthetic; it’s fabulous.

One of the bronze pathways led us toward a large, stone Golgotha, also known as the site of Jesus’s crucifixion. The replica functioned like a two story house. On the bottom floor, there was an open tomb and on the hilltop stood three empty crosses. Golgotha shocked me back to reality. I, a gay man, aimlessly walked about a place that prided itself on their replica “whipping post” as a “recreation of the place Pilate had Jesus scourged.” I had started to get distracted by the campy feel of HLE. Although everything at HLE is fake, there are very real-world implications to these beliefs. Christian families and churches still disown gay people. The teachings had made me feel isolated and lonely. My secret had kept me in a heightened state of anxiety for nearly two decades. I prayed almost every night for my soul, and my heart breaks for gay kids who feel abandoned by the church. Golgotha reminded me that a majority of HLE

workers and park attendees thought I was going to hell. They probably wouldn't even like me walking on their sacred AstroTurf, *so maybe I should stop taking so many mirror selfies*. While I gazed upon the site of Christ's crucifixion, John wandered into an adjacent replica of a tomb. I sprinted to catch up with him as he disappeared into a dark hallway.

I rounded the corner to find myself in a room of about 50 people. Candles lit the tomb. A sign said the communion wafers were gluten-free. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I heard a strange, unfamiliar sound. An HLE employee yelled into a microphone: "Create your own language." As the HLE employee called on the Holy Spirit, the candles, menacing yells, and cave façade made me feel as though I'd been unwittingly transported back to a medieval scene. I couldn't help but remember that in the 1500s, homosexuals were burned at the stake. Then, the park employee launched into a rapid, made-up, and somewhat appropriative version of Hebrew as a way to "speak in tongues." I'd been taught as a child that "speaking in tongues" happened on very rare occasions. The Holy Spirit would inhabit a believer's body who would sound like they spoke gibberish, but one – and only one – other church member would understand them and interpret the message. Speaking in tongues had freaked me out as a kid, because a person couldn't control when it happened.

John walked to the front row of HLE guests, who for some reason held metal goblets. In my deepest and holiest voice I shouted: "John, get back here, right now." My tone stopped him cold.

"Drop me home," John said as we exited the air conditioned tomb.

"Are you having fun?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "Take me home to see my dog."

*

Around 4 PM, we sat down to watch the bloody recreation of Jesus's crucifixion. It's HLE's main attraction, and all the park's food venues close when it begins in the massive gold and white coliseum that I'd passed so often on the interstate. From the outside, the building looks like a gaudy version of an amphitheater where gladiators might fight rhinestone leopards. The inside is even better. In HLE's earliest years, the passion play, which they perform every day, occurred outside. News flash: it's hot in Florida, so they eventually built this 2,000-seat theater officially called "Trinity Broadcasting Network Church of All Nations." When we first arrived at HLE, it had seemed pretty empty of guests, but a few hundred or so people now filed into seats. The park must have used all the money they saved on forgoing rides and invested it into this theater. A huge LED screen back-dropped the main stage. Two smaller stages occupied the middle. The sound system was massive and worthy of an aging pop star's Vegas residency. I thought HLE's \$50 price tag too expensive, but if guests attend this approximately 1.5 hour show, they *almost* get their money's worth.

I approached the show in a very I'm-on-vacation way as I tried to stave off imminent heat stroke. I bring this up, because I paid little attention to the beginning. Then, a park employee approached me as actor-Jesus walked through the crowd and touched people on body parts that ailed them. "Raise your hand if you have arthritis or ulcers," he said. "God can heal lung damage, even lung cancer – all types of cancer will fall into submission. Nerves that can't grow will now grow." During this health symposium, I had absentmindedly responded to a text.

As actor-Jesus talked about healing blindness, an employee walked up to me. My heart stopped almost like Lazarus's had. John and I sat in the second row, and I feared this woman wanted me to go on stage for audience participation. Did she recognize me as a gay and think I

needed prayer? I decided to avoid eye contact with the woman at all costs, but I'd play along if she persisted. Things rarely end well for those who protest audience participation.

"You need to turn off your cellphone," she said. "They can affect the lighting cues."

Chastised and embarrassed, I slumped in my seat and turned my full attention to the show. This show interjected Jerusalem marketplace jokes such as "lettuce rejoice" and "isn't that grape," but it quickly dropped any hint of levity. The narrative may have followed a well-trodden arc, but that didn't mean the gruesome drama was any less traumatizing to witness. These passion plays are viewed by some Christians as good things for children to see, because they help save souls. A news story I saw as a kid said that a super literal group had performed a crucifixion in which they actually hammered real nails through the actor-Jesus's palms. That's something that sticks with you even in adulthood.

Near the end of the show, when actor-Judas betrayed actor-Jesus at HLE, John put his head in the neck opening of his shirt. He leaned on my shoulder and started to cry. I couldn't see Gramel's face, because she sat in a different row, one reserved for senior citizens. I started to regret our decision to bring John to the play, and I wondered if she felt the same way. I looked behind me and saw a kid in tears. There were kids much younger than John in the audience, but I still felt bad for making him watch soldiers beat Jesus, then hang him on a cross. At John's age, the concept of eternal flames had terrified me, because I was taught there was nothing a gay guy could do to avoid them. I think that's what upset me the most: I wanted to follow Jesus, but everyone made sure to let me know gay people couldn't. It seems like some Christian sects spend a lot of time reminding gay people that we're different, that, in their opinions, we are lesser. As John sniffled next to me, I felt like a monster. Christianity can put a lot of pressure on young person. Our eternal souls are at stake. John had taken a picture with an actor-Jesus earlier,

and now he saw another actor-Jesus get brutally killed. I hugged my brother tight. I contemplated walking out, but I knew Gramel wouldn't hear of it. She paid \$150 for us to be there.

A few minutes later, Jesus resurrected to mock-fight Satan. John wiped his face. The music cued a *Rocky* scenario. I immediately remembered the song because I'd performed to it as a teenager. In high school, I joined the karate team of my church-school's youth group. We fought for Christ. The youth group's other teams included gymnastics for jocks and an anti-drug sketch theater group for, ironically, the cool kids. We'd practice separately, then come together to perform as one big group for middle and high school students. Every year we took our proselytizing act on the road. We ministered to "urban" youth in Philadelphia, California, and even Jamaica. My karate group sometimes performed to the same HLE fight song. I front kicked as an angel, but I was never picked to fight as one of the coveted lead positions – Jesus or Satan. I consider this oversight a missed opportunity for them. When the HLE actor-Jesus broke through Satan's chains, John looked over at me. He had stopped crying.

"This is awesome," he said.

The curtain closed on the passion play, and park employees led a worship time like the ones that filled Gramel's DVR. These costumed individuals invited audience members to prostrate themselves in prayer on the stage's carpeted steps. I wanted to leave so we could beat some of the post-HLE traffic, and I'd had enough of glitzy Middle East. But John wasn't ready. A woman sang "Amazing Grace," and John hugged the older, pinched-face man who stood next to him. Throughout the whole day, John had told me to take him home, but when I tried to finally leave, he'd hopped on board the The Holy Land Experience train.

"I go on stage," John said.

"No," I quickly answered.

I said *no* partly because the praise-leader directed people to the stairs and not the stage itself. John had said *stage*, so I knew he'd beeline for the singer. Then, the next thing I'd know, he'd have a microphone in one hand and an HLE contract to become a regular performer in the other. I tapped Gramel on the shoulder, and we gave each other head nods to the exit. The three of us walked toward the outside world, but we stopped at the theater entrance doors. I questioned my denial of John's stage request. What if this was an important moment for him? Did he understand what was going on, and, if so, should I support him?

"John wants to go on stage," I said to Gramel. "What do you think?"

Her eyes teared.

"John, you can't go on the stage," she said, "but you can bow down and pray on the steps."

As I watched John walk up to the stage, I realized how seriously people take this whole ritual. HLE seemed so overproduced that it almost reached the point of parody. One could easily make fun of HLE and write it off as a fundamentalist based freak show like I thought I might. The whole premise would probably make most "liberal" or even slightly-less-conservative Christians uncomfortable because of its ancient vibe. It's also tacky. There were like silver thrones and gold lions at every turn. But I won't ridicule HLE too much. Trinity Broadcasting Network probably possesses an Illuminati-level of behind-the-scenes power, and I actually had a kind of good time. John bent down on the stairs. I couldn't help but think how in the Bible it says we should all have faith like a child.

*

About three weeks later, Gramel, John, and I walked toward my former home church's sanctuary. Fancy chairs and tables filled the once barren hallway that connected the new sanctuary to the old one, now a café. John asked if we'd see his favorite TV pastor Joyce Meyer at this service. I told him no, but that I wished we'd see her one day, because she's one of my top televangelist picks, too (she's got great style). An imitation stone fountain bubbled near a part of the church that'd been a parking lot when I was a kid. From the side door, I could see the building in which I'd been taught Creationism during high school. I thought I had prepared myself for anything this day could send my way, but then I saw my middle school basketball coach.

"I'm going into the bookstore," I said to Gramel, then quickly disappeared.

I gave myself a small pep talk in front of a bookshelf full of biographies about the Christian stars of *Duck Dynasty*. I hadn't told Gramel I felt uncomfortable, because I wanted everything to seem normal and for her not to worry. *You knew you'd see these people*, I thought. *You have to act like it's no big deal*. I contemplated a plan to ditch the church service, but soon I realized it'd be safer for me to meet back up with Gramel sooner rather than later. If anyone from my past approached me, she'd be able to talk them into a slow, satisfying death. I couldn't turn back, so I straightened my shoulders.

"I think I saw your middle school basketball coach right before you left," Gramel said when I caught back up with them.

"Oh," I said and pretended I hadn't.

A greeter handed me a bulletin. The new sanctuary probably fit 2,000 people, about as many as the HLE coliseum. I looked at how much the church had grown – services almost every night, reception dinners for new members. The church had gone from a mega-church to a mega-

mega-church. I scanned the bulletin to see if I recognized any names in it, and sure enough I did. In the announcements section, I saw a young couple who'd attended my high school had recently welcomed a new baby into the world. These love birds were both younger than me. People from my high school often married quickly, and my theory for this rush-to-marriage has to do with our abstinence-only form of sex education. The Supreme Court had just given me the right to marry, but, no matter Gramel's prodding, I was in no rush to get hitched. Anyway, I had disliked both of them in high school, so I folded the bulletin and tucked it away before I could read any more good news.

The pastor, a pasty man who wore a checkered shirt, soon asked the congregation to get out their Bibles and turn to Daniel. I hadn't been to church in years, but I could recite the names of all the Old Testament books in order. I could still probably dominate a Sword Drill. There are a lot of fun stories in that part of the Bible, too. It's full of snakes that talk, dinosaurs, and tales of daughters who get their dad drunk so they can sleep with him. The pastor talked about Daniel and how people don't read the Bible so much as anticipate what it's going to say. "We've so religious-ized the words," he said. "It's more ritual than reality. We've lost what they mean."

A band started to play worship music. The singers wore purple shirts to match the stage's massive, theatrical curtain. Words for "Open the Eyes of My Heart Lord" flashed across a big screen. I didn't need to look at them. I had sung this song many times in my high school chapel days. Church had been a huge part of my life, and there were still parts of it – the stories, the singing – that I loved, that reminded me of my family.

Gramel's voice trilled the same falsetto I had loved as a kid. John raised his hand and said "Amen." I tried to harmonize with him, but his annoyed glance meant he didn't appreciate my melodies. I then tried my best to out sing the person in a nearby row. I belted the words in my

deepest, most saintly voice. After the chorus, I sang louder. I wanted out sing to not only my pew mate, but I also wanted to out sing everyone else in the church. I didn't care if my voice went off key. I didn't care if it cracked. I just wanted everyone to know I was there.

[& future]

On Fear: “Don’t let the bastards see you cry or sweat.”

*

The House of Shock Therapy

Whoever first said *Face your fears to overcome them* overlooked a few key points. This shock therapy philosophy follows: if one is afraid of snakes (of which this *one* is terrified) then one must hold a snake. In the ideal situation, the snake would then turn into a cute-puppy-version of its deadly self and become lifelong friends with the one holding it. But I know nothing like that would ever work for me. In my estimation, the only way a therapist or “handler” could guarantee the snake would cooperate is to give it tranquilizers so it’s too lethargic to move. This *might* work, but it’s not like the said-snake signed a legally binding contract to refrain from a quick bite or loving strangle. My luck would conjure the pissy, teen snake with something to prove. Anyway, I can barely stand pictures of snakes on the internet, so there’s no way I could get close enough to hold one. While I knew shock therapy would fail to cure my snake phobia, I arrogantly decided to face one of my seemingly more manageable fears: haunted houses. I’d like to think otherwise, but I just might be the biggest scaredy cat in the country. For a paycheck, though, I agreed to report on The House of Shock, one of the largest and most controversial haunted houses in the United States.

Founded in 1992 by the rock band Pantera’s lead singer Phil Anselmo and his friends Ross Karpelman and Jay Gracinette, the House of Shock started off as a backyard party in New Orleans. Now, in 2014 and twenty-one years later, it has a permanent home in a 25,000-square-foot warehouse on grounds that look like an industrial wasteland just outside of the Crescent City in Jefferson Parish. Because of the house’s use of occult symbolism and its blurred lines between performers and spectators, the House of Shock has been protested by numerous religious groups.

These groups often protested under the belief that live babies were sacrificed inside a particularly intense area of the house known as the Church of Satan. In the late 1990s, a group of protestors even went so far as to break into the haunted attraction and sprinkle holy water throughout the “church.” Karpelman and his friends decided to deal with the protestors in a very House-of-Shock way.

“We put our own protestors out there,” he told me. “It was all part of the show.”

Protests eventually died down, and Karpelman said the house became part of the New Orleans Halloween tradition. The House of Shock usually opens the first weekend of October and receives between 700 to 2,000-plus guests on Fridays and Saturdays, sometimes including big names like movie star Will Smith, who visited the haunted house earlier in October. On Halloween night alone, an estimated 4,000 people will buy tickets—\$25 for regular admittance, \$50 for VIP. This year *Top Haunts* Magazine placed the House of Shock in the top five on their Best Haunt List. In 2007, the Travel Channel named it the Most Extreme Haunted Attraction.

I’ve never understood why haunted houses are so popular or why they’re even a thing people willingly do. I grew up about two hours south of Orlando, FL, home to massive theme parks, which turn their rides into “scare zones” and haunted houses for Halloween. My friends always wanted to go to these hellish events and on a couple occasions I let them drag me by the hair with them. In eighth grade, I took my then-girlfriend on a “date” to one of these haunted nights. I rationalized the men with chainsaws as actors with lives and families for which they needed to provide by fake-killing people. But when I stepped over the fog-laced threshold of our first haunted house, a mummy or vampire jumped toward me. I panicked. As any gentleman would do, I pushed my young girlfriend toward the monster and got out of there with the quickness of an Olympic sprinter. This reaction, unfortunately, was not an isolated occurrence.

Nearly a decade later, a similar situation occurred at one of those same amusement parks. As my ex-boyfriend used to tell at parties, I almost knocked over one of the crazy-convict-Day-Glo-wearing “clowns” and took down a couple set pieces as I barreled through the house. I can neither confirm nor deny his account, because I sort of just closed my eyes, screamed and ran for my life.

As the sun set on a post-apocalyptic looking part of Louisiana, I clung to Chris Rose, a volunteer Shocker of 16 years, designated to guide me through the empty house. Whoever first said *Face your fears to overcome them* must have been either a truly crazy and deranged individual or a writer with bills to pay and a looming deadline.

*

Though many parts of Louisiana could be called pretty, this desolate *Mad Max*-esque wasteland reminded me of an overturned dumpster. It smelled like one, too. Rose guided me past a gigantic, stone stage where, each night, a carnival barker type guy greeted the night’s crowd with pyrotechnics and the cute party trick of hanging cinderblocks from chains attached to his nipple clamps. The set looked like a medieval torture station meets heavy metal rock concert. Another one of the night’s acts consisted of suspension artists who hung their bleeding bodies from giant fish hooks dug into their backs. This took place next to a food trailer, selling Pentagon Pizza (two slices, \$3) and zombie funnel cakes (\$5).

Rose led me to the cemetery, the main outside portion which leads into the covered warehouse. Tombstones and dilapidated statues fill the cemetery. An elevated bridge watches over the dirty path. A passing train sounded as though it might fall off the tracks at any moment. *I’m a professional reporter and I can do this*, I kept telling myself to no avail.

“A lot of people don’t even make it out of the cemetery,” Rose said. “Last week alone we had about a dozen people walk back through the gate.”

He said cast members call these people “thanks for the donation” and “take the walk of shame.”

I laughed at this nickname, because well, that’s me. In each major section, security guards stand, cross-armed and ready to help scaredy-cats find designated exits. One person already had a heart attack inside the House. I knew I’d be the second.

Rose told me the then-empty cemetery would later be occupied by about 25 to 30 cast members. They hide behind bushes and stick their hands between bars of iron gates, which line the dirt path and help direct patrons. Unlike commercial haunted houses, the House of Shock is run completely by volunteers, nearly 400 of them, who make up the roster of cast members, tech people, ticket booth operators, and set designers. Volunteers consider each night a performance and want give patrons the best scare possible. To become one of these cast members, a person has to have a veteran of at least two years vouch for them. They don’t let just anyone join this tight-knit crew.

“We don’t want anyone doing anything stupid,” he said. “We’re not in the business to hurt anyone. We’re just here to scare the shit out of people.”

Rose, 44, told me his 13-year-old daughter, who the cast nicknamed “Scraper Girl,” has worked in the graveyard for the past four years. “This is her little hiding place,” he said as he pointed to an out-of-the-way corner, which I committed to memory because the thought of a zombie teen Scraper Girl terrified me.

“It’s not too bad now, but you have to imagine the cemetery at night,” he said. “It’s really creepy.”

From the cemetery, we walked through a tattered entrance into the warehouse's Voodoo Room. The crew works on the house year-round, and the least-popular sections get updated. The Voodoo room, though, stays each year, because of its connection to New Orleans. I examined a bracelet and pearl earring at the queen's altar.

"We scare people out of their shoes and jewelry," Rose said. "These are all trinkets—flip flops and sunglasses—that people have left throughout the years."

Rose may have wanted me to linger in each room, but I pushed him along as fast as possible. We snaked through the warehouse, which made so many turns I felt lightheaded. Though my fear of the props in haunted houses may be irrational, what's not is: they're perfect places for real killers. If a killer attacked someone, guests would say *Oh, it looks so real*. Then, they'd go about their business as unsuspecting thrill seekers get murdered. *It's just part of the act!* If I were to commit a crime in the House of Shock, it'd have to be in a room dubbed the Marigny Massacre House. Women screamed through blood-caked mouths. Entrails already hung from its ceiling. Bodies could easily get stashed in the dark corners.

While I stumbled through the Massacre, section leader Holly "The Banshee" Coleman pointed out where she wanted her team to hide. Rose asked the 20-year cast member to take a quick break to talk to me. The room closed in on me, and I started to feel claustrophobic. While nice of Rose to help me do my job, I wanted to get out as quickly as possible, so I kept our conversation brief.

"This whole area is nothing but Roller Derby girls," Coleman told me. "We started our own team. We're all House of Shockers." The crew met while doing the house together, and they wanted to hang—and get out some aggression—during non-Halloween months. "There are weddings and babies being born here," Karpelman told me later. "We're one big, satanic

family.” Along with Coleman, a few of the women are “Dirty Deeds,” “Calamity” and “Darko.” Their team is called the “Crescent City Derby Dolls.” Though a sweet story, it didn’t make me feel any less scared and I abruptly left the conversation with a “Well, I’m sure you’re really busy.”

When I first entered the house, I had immediately felt I’d walked into a trap. Coleman’s kindness helped confirm they plotted against me. In my communications with the House of Shock people, I had explicitly stated I needed to be like “a fly on the wall” for my article, and I’d appreciate the cast to *pretty please* pretend I wasn’t even there. This tactic, which I reasoned coincided with journalistic practices, was more to ensure no one would try to scare me.

While Rose led me deeper and deeper into the house, I convinced myself that around every maggot-filled next corner, a Leatherface type would put a bag over my head. It takes about 30 to 35 minutes for patrons to make their way through the whole house. Throughout the tour, I death-gripped my notebook. I might have blacked out from terror, but I had these notes: a dog that’s skinned, it’s all in your head, out of control, cattle, there’s a cage that little girls stay in, magazines cover the walls in the Country Doll House room, it smells like death and sewage, stuffed animals, and the sci-fi room is a raver’s dream.

“Are you going to stick around and go through the House tonight?” Rose asked. “You’ll be able to see it in its full glory.”

“I don’t know if I’m gonna go through the whole thing,” I said. “We’ll see.”

“Don’t be a pussy.”

“Sometimes,” I said, “you just are what you are.”

*

A man cried as he ran out of the house, past the food trailer. A security guard comforted a 12-year-old girl who wept in line. She never made it into the house.

“I peed my pants,” said Gina Cavello, 40.

Quwina Grimes, 28, said somewhere in the house her heart stopped.

Angel Westberry, 43, watched the pyrotechnic stage show that entertained visitors while they waited. Westberry has visited the House once a season “probably since it started,” but fear prevented her from ever stepping foot inside.

“A lot of people have said we shouldn’t do some things we do,” said Karpelman. “They would probably be right, if we were doing this for money.”

After I talked to terrified guests, I went to the cemetery, my first station of the night. To make sure no zombies could creep up on me, I sandwiched myself between a tomb and a wall. Zombie cast member “Momma Jen,” who I guessed was in her late-50s (the makeup made it hard to tell), had understood my “fly on the wall” situation and intervened when other zombies tried to get in my face. During brief breaks between the groups, Momma Jen told me about her approach to scaring people. “I like to find the scaredy cats,” she said. “When their shoulders shrink, I know I got them.” Momma Jen also said the common goal of terrifying people had unified all the volunteers, and the House of Shock had become a family affair for her. In the same cemetery stood Momma Jen’s daughter and husband, whose bruised face framed his whited-out zombie eyes, the stuff of nightmares. They consider the other cast members family, a sentiment shared throughout the House of Shock.

“We all really care about each other,” she said. “One of the other characters just had bypass surgery, and we cooked food to send him.”

I'd wanted to stay with sweet Momma Jen all night, but after an hour she led me somewhere deep in the warehouse to The Swamp, which smelled like a moldy towel. This section looked like a potential set piece from *Misery: The Everglades Edition*. Overgrown bushes and trees surrounded a rundown shack. It was the perfect place for snakes to thrive. The Swamp lacked friendly faces, because cast members lacked actual faces. They wore feedbag masks. They got right up in patron's grills. Machetes hung at their sides. Any time one of these feedbag people approached me I yelled, "I'm the WRITER," which I doubted they heard over the concert-level buzz of fake mosquitoes. At this pitch, the buzz, buzz, buzz of the mosquito soundtrack became torturous. I *almost* felt more worried about losing my mind than getting slashed to bits. Then, there was the mossman to worry about, too. No one knows where the mossman hides. When he's in costume, cast members don't even know where he is, because he blends in so well with the set. I crouched on a bowed wooden bridge in mossman territory.

I was supposed to spend less than an hour in The Swamp, but the mossman dropped the ball and forgot he was supposed to lead me to my next section. I eventually made myself a bit more comfortable on the bridge and watched patrons. They pushed past the bridge, The Swamp's main scare zone. Both women and men screeched. I felt solidarity with them, but I also started to understand the appeal of cast member participation. I mean, sure, at the House of Shock there's a community of roller derbying, home-cooking people to be a part of, but on a visceral level: scaring people looked kind of fun.

Finally, the mossman remembered he was supposed to lead me to my next spot. Mossman, whose name I'd been told was Ralph, found me, lifted his mask, and made a gruff introduction. Ralph wanted as little to do with me as I did with him. He was in "the zone" of scaring people and didn't want to be bothered by some reporter. He quickly led me through the

cast member catacombs on the outskirts of the actual house. Through a series of turns, he deposited me into the bright lights of the House's controversial Church of Satan. I came in at the end of a sacrifice, and I positioned myself near an altar as I tried to figure out what the hell I had just witnessed.

"All right, ya'll," a priest with a half-burnt face said to his minions inside the Church of Satan. "Let's put on a good show tonight."

About ten minutes later, he stood at an altar in front of a nearly five-foot, lit-up pentagram. Near him, a woman on her back shrieked, "I am a whore mother," as a man with his face melted off reached between her legs. A crucified skeleton watched over them.

"Hail Satan," the priest screamed. "There is only darkness."

Music that sounded like it was made by a loud electric organ mixed with the sound of flames. The priest's tallest and most dominant minion grabbed a chambermaid in a tattered-dress by the hair and flung her to the ground. As guests clung to each other, some crossing their chests in the sign of the cross, a baby doll was born. An umbilical cord hung from the now desecrated Mary. The priest shouted he would castrate the child.

This devil scene caused protesters to hound the House of Shock in its earliest years. I grew up a Southern Baptist, and I have to admit, I may have said a few prayers while I watched the ritual. I must have seen it twenty times, the happenings looked so life-like I could understand how protestors mistook it as real. Holley Coleman, the roller derby Marigny Massacre leader, later told me the protesters had actually been right, and once upon a time the act did feature a live baby, her then six-month old son, Devin Fleming.

But they never sacrificed him.

"We just pinched him a little," she said.

Fleming, the protested baby, is now 17. He is a House of Shock renaissance almost-man. In the makeup trailer, he keeps a bottle of fake blood next to a can of pizza Pringles. He applies a neck scars to cast members in the meat processing room. Instead of playing the young anti-Christ, he now wears a tattered robe and helps deliver the now-fake baby.

I watched these satanic shows for about two hours. I ultimately came to view them as a type of performance art. Cast members embodied a character and committed to their roles. The huge house functioned as a series of narratives. Themes brought the horror to life. They provided a service for patrons who wanted to get scared out of their daily routine.

For the most part, the crew didn't try to scare me. Nobody tried to bag me up or throw my body into the Mississippi. I appreciated the cast's efforts very much, but as I walked out of the house unscathed, my body ached. Though I clung to my haunted-house-as-theater musings, I still felt traumatized.

*

When the last guest exited the house around 12:20 a.m., cast members and crew gathered in a lot lined with port-o-potties and make-up stations. They exchanged scare stories as guests recounted their own nights of horror.

The cemetery's sniffing zombie "Momma Jen" sat in a blue folding chair, and said her family would eventually find her. The satanic priest, now shirtless, wore camouflage cargo shorts. Many actors waited in line for food.

A flashing House of Shock billboard looked down on volunteers taking off their make-up. Most of the actors were exhausted, having been in character for about three hours. Child actors roamed the haunted house like a daycare center.

Ten-year-old Heaven Wilt gained the cast's respect by making a man pee himself on her first night. "I'm locked in a cage, and I'm screaming 'I'm the anti-Christ,'" Wilt said. "It's funny."

Wilt's cage is positioned next to Kayla Thornton, who at six years old is the youngest girl in the house. "I made a grown man cry tonight," said Thornton. "If I can do that, I can do anything."

During the entire night, an adult is hidden near the girls and watches to make sure they are safe. The two young girls, never seemed to lose energy. They danced together, calling each other "blood buddies."

I'm sure some people would argue that kids shouldn't perform in a haunted house, but I'd wager neither Thornton nor Wilts are scared of "monsters under the bed." They've seen disfigured monsters, their friends, take off makeup. Plus, I can guarantee they'll never run-scared out of a haunted house on a date. While those two young girls inspired me to be more fearless, my time at the House of Shock definitely did not cure my fear of haunted houses. In fact, I'll most likely never visit one again. And this resolution makes me extremely happy.

I'm still irrationally terrified of little girls dressed as demented dolls and old men in zombie face, but my House of Shock night did make me more resolute. We need to face fears like applying for a dream job or asking someone out, because doing that will improve our daily lives. Other fears, the irrational ones, not so much. Who cares if haunted houses and snakes make me break into cold sweats? I don't want to waste time feeling self-conscious about them anymore. If one is afraid of snakes then one should not feel they need to hold a snake. If one is afraid of haunted house then one shouldn't, under any circumstance, feel they need to go into one.

A man who taunts me with “don’t be a pussy” is dealing with his own fears and limitations. Regardless, I’m no longer going to let these mainly-in-my-head taunts get me into a situation where a snake bites me or I have a heart attack in a haunted house. It’s just not worth it. Well, all right. It *may* not be worth it unless bills are due, and I’m on a very tight writing deadline. Anyway, I’m going to try to accept the fact I’m irreversibly scared of certain things. In the face of fear, sometimes you just are who you are. That’s just the way life is. And no matter what anyone else tells you: It’s perfectly OK to be a scaredy-cat.

On Tradition: “Listen to people you respect. Listen to yourself.”

*

Crackers and Collards: A Floridian’s Southerness

Come see Savannah, Georgia, at its best. This tour itinerary is as follows, and all times are approximate.

[Day One]

4:30 AM: Depart pickup location.

At the first seats behind the bus driver, Gramel grabbed my arm and stopped. She’d paid \$15 extra to reserve these spaces for us at the front, which helped her avoid errant passenger legs and also made me feel like a VIP. I needed any little boost in confidence I could get. The 2010 economy had been treating me like a redheaded-stepchild, and, if beard-color counts, I technically am, but still: I was unemployed and broke. Earlier in the year, I had graduated college. Then, like any good quasi-Millennial, I complained about the economy and moved back home to stay in my old bedroom still lined with shelves full of California Raisins and Dream Team memorabilia. The economic situation had proven awful for my bank account, but unemployment left plenty of time to take a three-day trip to Savannah, Georgia where I planned to feel as Southern as possible.

At 23 years old, I was the motorbus baby, the youngest rider by at least three or four decades on the 60-person tour. A woman who rocked a grey, cotton candy bouffant, clutched her a grumpy husband’s arm. The couple walked passed us toward the back to fraternize with other non-VIP bus riders. All around me, senior citizens chit-chattered. This noise transported me back to middle school field trips to Washington D.C. and a museum in which a cool couple had

allegedly made out in one of the exhibits. For those trips, I had wanted to sit by someone who could boost my social status, but my current bus rider crew probably gossiped about AARP discounts instead of their crushes.

“The man from Indiana really has a Southern accent,” Gramel said of one our bus mates to whom she’d probably already told her life story. “He sounds more Southern than I do.”

When I tell people I’m from Florida, they usually respond with something along the lines of *No one’s born there. Florida’s crazy. It’s not the South. It’s Disney World. There are beaches. Old people live there.* Yes, Mickey Mouse lives in the state, and many old people do migrate here. Crazy, well that’s relative. But I’d say probably *yeah* we’re a bit on the crazy side. The whole not-southern thing, though, is a little harder to explain. Florida’s earliest history dates all the way back to Ponce de Leon’s search for the Fountain of Youth in St. Augustine. He christened my home state La Florida or “flowery land.” In 1845, the flowery land became the twenty-seventh United State. Most people consider the South the states that fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War and mistakenly think Florida was doing its own thing. Antebellum Floridians participated in the slave economy, but most didn’t own slaves as they couldn’t afford to maintain crops. Florida actually did secede from the Union and fought as part of the Confederacy. Two of the Civil War’s major battles were fought in North Florida. Gramel says that none of our family fought in the Civil War, but that we descended from a long line of Southerners.

I have found remnants of this Southern history in a plastic box at Mom’s house. The box mostly contained photos of me at various stages of my dyed-beach-blond hair and pimply life. Among those photos, there was also a baby bib. Bibs usually show a cute little graphic such as a smiling frog or fluffy, marshmallow clouds. The bib in my photo box, though, had my name

stitched in stark red on pure white. Below my name, the Confederate Flag is sewn to take up the most whitespace.

Tyler right below the old, Southern flag.

My great-great-grandfather was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. As Gramel told me, in his Klan days the men acted as neighborhood vigilantes. Gramel told me he quit the Klan once they started to hide their identities behind sheets, because he wouldn't be part of such a shameful group. Regardless whether he quit for that reason, my family still had ties to the KKK. It is difficult for me to accept this reality, but Southerners can't gloss over such not-so-distant history. We need to acknowledge the racist history of the white South instead of doing our best to justify it with revisionist history. The Confederate flag, stitched on my baby bib, is a prime example.

As a child, I'd been told the Confederate flag was a reminder of "the South." My grandfather had a Confederate flag belt buckle, and there's my bib. When I'm back home, I often see people driving trucks emblazoned by decals of the flag and jeeps that have the actual flag attached to their side bars. One of Gramel's neighbors on the same side of her street even flies a version of the flag that has a yellow smiley face on it and the words: *If this flag offends you...it made my day*. It had taken me years to understand most households didn't display some form of a Confederate flag like mine had.

4:30 PM: *Take a historical vacation through Savannah, Georgia, one of America's oldest cities.*

It's too early for all this, I thought as I sat in my VIP seat on a bus full of gossipy senior citizens. I watched as the seats filled with the type of women who wear their hair in curlers on Sundays and complain about the temperature for the whole nine hours. The men avoided eye contact with me and would brood until we stopped for food. We rolled through a North Florida full of cow

farms and orange trees. The internet, and most anyone who's spent time in Florida other than at the beach, call North Florida – Tallahassee, the panhandle, Jacksonville – the South. In an online forum on this topic, username trummeans says, "The state is pretty much divided at the I-4 corridor (from about Daytona Beach across through Orlando on to the west coast near Tampa) and I think that's a good dividing line in terms of 'southerners' and 'not southerners.'"

I grew up in the in-between on the west coast, so I can't claim geography, but this farmland area is around where my great grandmother, Granny Lula, was born in 1917. Her birth certificate stated *Mouny Oak*, which was just outside Gainesville city limits. In 2000, she participated in an oral history project, because, as the Historical Society interviewer Ruth Ann noted, Granny Lula was "one of our rare Florida natives." In the interview, she said her father lived in Southern Georgia, then migrated down to Florida. "Mom, to the best of my knowledge," she said, "was born in Bell, Florida." According to the 2000 US census, Bell, Florida, across from St. Augustine, counted a population of 349 people. A Google-map street view puts a camera seemingly in the middle of a field. It shows mostly pine trees and a couple of rust-caked houses, similar to the ones our tour bus rolled past. Broken cars were parked on side-yards. I imagined pigs lining up at troughs out back. Their snouts covered in mud as they jostled for slop.

My mom's double-shifts as a waitress meant that my childhood weekdays were often spent in Granny Lula's mobile home. She cooked grits and told me stories about how she'd cut off chickens' heads for dinner. Her pitch got valley-low then shot up to the sky at the best parts. One of my favorite Granny Lula stories took place in an outhouse on her family's farm. As she used "the commode," her brother or cousin crept around back. He then stuck a pitchfork up the outhouse hole. This story sounds ripped from a horror movie. When I first heard it, though, I had found the North Florida story quite hilarious.

During the almost nine hours of this tour's bus-travel, I listened to a grab-bag of dialects: New Yorker, New Englander, and New-Jersey-ian. That's on par for Florida as the state seems to be a repository for old(er) people from New states. For the 150 years after statehood, Florida's population increased by about ten new residents per hour. That number means a tremendous amount of non-native people. In this time, too, Florida went from a slave-state to one of our country's most ethnically diverse regions. One of the reason Florida's so hard to properly categorize is because it's currently the most American state in the US. I don't mean this in any patriotic way or anything, but in the sense that many different kinds of Americans have made the Long State their home. I mean, there's even a whole town of Amish people here.

These transplants connected more to the land than the culture. While this massive increase in population led to Florida's demographic mix, it also gave us – or at-least me – an identity-crisis of sorts. The state's both everything and nothing. It's a melting pot in which everything is so melted it's hard to recognize anything.

We'll make one stop. You are responsible for your own meal.

When I was a kid, Granny Lula took me to the cracker Supper every year. At this Cracker supper, a meal I refer to solely as "dinner," Granny Lula talked to friends from high school. I listened to them exchange stories about sweethearts and school dances. These pursed-lipped Cracker women wore cut-out oranges pinned as name-tags. I had seen many of the women at my Southern Baptist church. At church, they wore soft, pink lipstick. They curled their hair, stuck in place by hairspray and hot weather. I'd fidget in the pew as the church-women crossed their pale-stockinged legs. When the gold, offering plate came around they'd pull out tithes from

pocketbooks. Then, snap the pocketbooks closed. At the Cracker supper, they gave me hugs and asked, “How’s your momma.”

As Granny Lula talked to her friends, I played with my toy Batman. In between rounds of saving Gotham City, I walked up to the food line to get hand-squeezed orange juice – the best OJ I’ve ever tasted. I piled my plate with cornbread. The cooks brought out big, metal pots of collard greens. Other kids my age liked pizza or chicken nuggets, but my favorite food was collards. I drenched them in white vinegar. I ate the leafy greens until I got sick. At these dinners, generations of Floridians ate together and I chomped on my collards right next to them. We were all Crackers.

For certain people in Florida and other places in the South, *cracker* has come to mean “white trash.” I recently asked my friend from a decidedly Northern city her thoughts on the term’s offensive nature, and she said something close to, “Doesn’t it just mean, like, a cracker you eat, and it’s white, so people use it to mean white people.” Urban Dictionary, the online decoder of all things slang, says cracker is “derived from the sound of a whip being cracked by slave owners.” The whip-crack, in Florida’s case, was not made by slave owners but from cowboys herding livestock. I imagine the cowboy as he raises a whip above his head, spurs his horse, and leans forward. He wants to keep the livestock together, so he swings his arm down with the full-force of his job. One crack, pull back, crack, pull back, and crack, again. These crackers helped build Florida, the South, and its economy.

While the term is now used as slur, I grew up identifying as a cracker. For me, the word means collard greens and church-ladies passing the offering plate. It also reminds me of family dinners for which Gramel made “cracker salad.” As with chicken salad or tuna salad, the ‘salad’

part of this dish is a misnomer; there's no lettuce. It had taken me years to realize cracker salad was named after the saltine crackers and not because it was a regional, Florida thing.

Cracker Salad Recipe, as told to me by Gramel

- one sleeve saltine crackers
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- two tomatoes

To prepare: In a fat Tupperware bowl, take three to four crackers at a time and break them up by hand. Then, cut up the tomatoes any way you want and throw them, with as much juice as possible, into the bowl. Start to mix.

Approximate time to make: **four minutes or less**

I once told my Texan friend, a woman in her 60s, I planned to bring it to a potluck. “That’s white trash food,” she said. I don’t think my friend was trying to be rude, but her remark caught me off guard because cracker salad had been a staple of my childhood. Was I white trash? According to Gramel, white trash meant a person or family was dirty and lacked ethics. When Gramel had explained this to me, she used examples of people we knew (whose names I’ll omit now). We were decidedly not white trash because, as Gramel said, we still had manners. When I cooled off from the sting of my friend’s “white trash” culinary proclamation, I came to see her point. The idea for cracker salad must have come about on a day when some momma didn’t have enough ingredients to make a “good meal.” It’s comprised of refrigerator dregs. Plus, anything with that much mayonnaise can’t really be considered classy. It’s still one of my favorite things to eat when I’m back home. I eat it cold, straight from the refrigerator and soggy. That’s actually how I like it best.

6:30 PM: *In Savannah we will board a riverboat for refreshing river breezes and cultural entertainment. It's an experience not to be missed.*

For cheaper rates, the bus tour organizer booked us all a hotel about twelve miles from Savannah. After Gramel and I chilled in a room for a bit, we loaded back onto the bus and drove toward downtown. Our bus driver pointed toward a large bridge. "If you go just cross there," he said, "you'll be in South Carolina."

The dinner boat looked like an old-timey postcard. College-aged guys dressed in tuxedos led us into an interior that resembled a piano bar outlined by a shiny floor.

"Do you think it'll be too much for us to drink a bottle of wine by ourselves?" asked Gramel. I shook my head no, and she ordered a bottle of chardonnay.

The night's "cultural entertainment" was a deejay playing songs from the 1950s. After an Elvis song, a group of Girl Scouts got up to dance. Savannah is the birthplace of the Girl Scouts, and the group was making a pilgrimage.

"Let's go upstairs," I said to Gramel.

"Only if you make sure I don't fall."

On the main deck, Savannah's breeze, damp and chilly, whipped around us. In the moonlight, I could see the choppy ripples of greenish-brown water. "It's such a nice, Southern night," Gramel said. "It reminds me of my momma."

Granny Lula died when I was 17. After she passed away, I stopped eating collard greens as much. The Savannah night made me wish I could hear one more of her stories.

[Day Two]

Everyone will receive a 1.5-hour narrated trolley-tour of Savannah.

At breakfast, I sipped a cup of burnt coffee, and listened to three old ladies talk about Clint Eastwood.

“He directed the movie *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*,” said one of them, who wore a fanny pack. “It was filmed in Savannah.” I’d never seen the movie, but made a note to check it out later.

All of us from the tour bus couldn’t fit on one trolley, so we split into two groups. The trolley’s first step stood about a foot off the ground, and Gramel nearly fell on her climb up it. I caught her arm and lead her to a seat toward the middle of the trolley.

Our tour guide, a woman with a Betty Boop voice, pointed toward historic landmarks. I tried to listen to everything she said, but I mostly studied old store fronts and stuck-in-time buildings. Porches looked like perfect settings for refined men to drink sassafras and talk about nothing but the weather. Victorian-style columns vaulted to the sky. I imagined Southern belles rushing to pick up last minute items for a dinner party. Their yards, green and lush, led to squares. The city has 22 squares, and each unique to its neighborhood. Our tour guide said the neighborhoods decorate the squares for Christmas to show of each area’s unique personality. Patches of land offered park benches for resting and thinking. The witches’ hair of Spanish moss hung from hundred-year-old trees.

As our trolley moved toward the riverfront, I remembered how Gramel had defined the South. “The Old South was about an honor code,” she told me. “Southern people respect their land and family. They don’t leave it.”

The idea of Gramel’s belief we are a Southern family is really the only thing which makes me believe it’s true. My Florida is not my mom’s Florida is not Gramel’s

Florida is not Granny Lula's Florida. This is explained most simply by a trip to Clearwater Beach, a stretch of white sand about 15 minutes from my Mom's house. This beach is pretty famous for its white sand and clear-ish water. When I was in high school, rumors had circulated that the beach would host an iteration of MTV's Spring Break, which, to me, was the pinnacle of everything sexy and cool. To my knowledge, MTV never came, but the fact they considered Clearwater SPRING BREAK-worthy showed just how on-the-map Clearwater Beach had become. In the last 50 or so years the beachfront has gone from what Gramel remembers as "sand dunes, no pavement, and long, needle pines" to what Mom calls "a hopping parking lot on weekends" to now a strip full of neon shops, hotels so big they block out the sun, and the site of a multi-level dance club that hosts wet t-shirt contests on weekends. People say there's no culture in Florida, but that's just not true. "It's just so sprawled and barf-y," said Janey, my fourth cousins on one of her yearly visits to Gramel's house. "There used to be orange groves to play in and now there's so much traffic."

Janey told me this one summer at Gramel's kitchen table. We were getting ready for a family barbecue later in the day, and Janey was making her famous potato salad. In between trips to the kitchen, she talked about the Florida she remembers from back in the 50s. She was born in our hometown four years after Gramel. The two cousins grew up together and took family trips to the lake almost every weekend. Back then, the girls wore crinolines –a wire structure to make fabric stiff and puff out – under their school skirts and while Gramel loved this style Janey called it awful. In her ninth grade year she grew seven inches to 5'9" and Gramel says "she could have pursued model, but instead she got out and played baseball." The two girls were somewhat opposites – girly girl and tomboy – but they both recall near idyllic Florida childhoods filled with beach trips and basketball games. Janey moved to Atlanta at 18 so she could attend a Christian

Bible college. She's what Gramel would call a "trailblazer": our town's first girl to play boy's little league, the first in our family to go to college, the first to leave Florida. Janey has lived near Atlanta for nearly 50 years – much longer than in Florida – but on her countless trips back she's seen our hometown go from a tightknit community with one school to a spread out city. It's only taken a few generations for Florida's identity shift.

"The way it was is that you could walk down the street and everybody knew everybody," she said. "Now not many people wave at you unless you know them."

Though Janey finished her first degree many years ago, she's still taking classes – Greek and Abnormal Psychology – at the same Christian college she moved to Atlanta to attend and also where she now works. She is 5' 10" (she grew one inch since her massive spurt) and wears her grey-white hair chopped short in a sort of pixie cut. There's no mistaking she's from the South. You can hear it in her thick drawl. To most people, a countrified accent is shorthand for "Southerner" and Janey sounds just like a character from *The Andy Griffith Show*. She said she must have picked it up from her years in Georgia, because none of her Florida family sounds like her. There's a hint of drawl to Gramel's voice, but nothing near the backroads slow and molasses sweet Georgia sound in her cadence. Janey's not sure she'd ever move back to the Sunshine State, but her daughter eventually wants to relocate to Florida as she's only ever lived in Georgia. Because of Florida's decade's long face lift, Janey is reluctant to make the move with her.

"When I come back to the area I want my childhood memories to be here, and they're not," she said. "That might be why. It was so much fun growing up here."

10:45 AM: *We will all meet at Paula Deen's Lady & Sons Restaurant for lunch.*

“Would you like lemon in your iced tea?” the waiter asks Gramel.

“No,” she says. “Lemon in iced tea is not a Southern thing to do.”

I'm not sure how Gramel came up with the “no lemon rule.” When asked, she says, “Momma didn't put lemon in tea.”

The tour group lined up for the comfort food buffet: fried chicken, pulled pork, lima beans, sweet potatoes, green beans, and collard greens. Deen opened this downtown spot on West Congress Street in 1996. Three years later, she showed up on the Food Network. Purple-haired Deen then became a celebrity. I had never followed her career, but Gramel was a huge fan of her show. This meal happened a few years before media outlets reported Deen had once allegedly dressed waiters as slaves at a wedding; the controversy caused many sponsors to drop her.

At the restaurant, waiters set down hoecakes, an unleavened cornmeal flatbread eaten with syrup. The dish's name is said to come from slaves cooking bread on field hoes. Granny Lula had made hoecakes for me when I was a kid. Other people at our table asked the server how to eat one, but I dug right into the meal.

The hoecakes were about the only food I really liked from Deen's buffet. Everything tasted salty. Eating a bite of her food felt close to the chef pouring a whole salt-shaker in my mouth. Granny Lula would not have approved. The saltiness made the food hard to eat, so I drank plenty of iced tea. I ordered it, of course, without any lemon.

After you have finished your lunch, you will have unlimited trolley service until 5 PM.

“I want to go to number 19 on this map,” I said to Gramel. “It’s Flannery O’Connor’s childhood home.”

“I’ve never heard of him,” she said and handed me her shopping bags.

A shuttle bus dropped us at the Cathedral of Saint Peter. It was closed for daily mass. Gramel and I walked through Lafayette Square. O’Connor’s childhood home stood near the corner of Abercorn and Charlton Street.

“I think it’s this way,” I said. Gramel nodded, then placed her hand on my elbow to steady herself.

“I thought we’d see more leaves changing for fall,” she said. “We saw more changing back in Florida than here.” She gripped my arm harder as we walked down the cobblestone-sidewalk.

“I need to rest a minute.”

As I helped guide Gramel toward a bench, I noticed a dull copper plaque: *Flannery O’Connor Childhood Home*. At 207 East Charlton Street, there was a grey house. Narrow steps led up to the four-story building. Gramel opened a romance novel, and stayed seated in Lafayette Square. I crossed the street, then made my way up to the Southern writer’s childhood house. The lock on the door was broken. A strong breeze could have opened it.

“Are you here for the tour?” asked a man with a grey beard. “I think you’re the only one.”

I walked around the big, open living space. A baby's wicker bassinet stood near the middle of the room. An old radio rested in the corner. The room's walls were mint green, and a little table was placed close to a window that looked out at Lafayette Square.

The man pointed at a picture near the old radio. "That little girl with the smug look on her face is Mary Flannery O'Connor when she was young." In the picture she wore a dress, and her legs weren't crossed like the Southern women at Granny Lula's church. One of O'Connor's most famous statements is: "Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days." This idea is partly why I'd started to re-think my family's traditions.

I'm a born-and-raised Floridian who grew up embarrassed by my home state. It's hard to defend a state that royally screwed up the 2000 presidential election simply because we can't count. Also, it's required by the laws of nature for pre-teens to hate everything about where they're born. This is particularly easy if you're from a state mostly known for surreal stories that usually involve drugs and sometimes real life zombies or python hunting in the Everglades – like, for real that's a thing and I read a story about how people caught an 18 foot, 130 pound python on one of these swamp expeditions. I even hated the beach! I started to fake tan as a teenager, and I went to the beach mostly at night to drink with friends behind sand dunes. I mean, and let's be real, the current Florida aesthetic of terra cotta, turquoise, and orange can go real tacky, real quick. To combat these hometown blues – in Florida this specific shade of blue would be teal –I'd create elaborate daydreams in which my family came from a long line of wealthy New Yorkers or one of those large, hardworking and broad shouldered broods from the Midwest. I wanted to come from a place above the Mason Dixon line, because even though Florida's kind of a Hodge podge of cultures, my family considered ourselves Southerners while

hardly anyone else did. If it's embarrassing to be a Floridian, then it's even more embarrassing to be a Floridian who has come to unabashedly love his state so much that he's now trying to figure out why he's now belatedly identifying as a Southern. Especially when "the South," in some circles, can be synonymous with "racist, homophobic, and trashy."

Later, I asked Gramel about her thoughts on the Confederate flag, and she told me none of our family members ever owned one. The flag iconography I'd seen in her house as a child, she said, were all bought by my grandfather who was born in PENNSYLVANIA and moved to Florida in his late-teens. She explained he bought them because he liked to "stir up trouble." When she said this, I couldn't remember seeing any Confederate flag stuff in the house after he died. The only other person Gramel personally knew who owned a Confederate flag was an old man from New York who, again, she says, liked to be rebellious. Gramel said the flag is not something people should hold onto and the people who do aren't doing so for the right reasons.

"Black people got screwed in the past," she said, "and if the flag upsets them, then people should honor that instead of throwing it in their faces. If my momma was alive she'd say the same thing."

*

8:15 PM: *We will arrive back at the hotel for the evening.*

When we arrived back at our hotel, I thumbed through *The Complete Stories* I had bought at O'Connor's childhood home. Gramel through TV channels.

"What do you think it means to be a Southerner?" I asked her.

“It’s the way you were raised,” she said without taking much time to think. “Family comes first, food second, and manners third. Above all, a man must be a gentleman and a woman has to be a lady.”

[Day Three]

Depart Hotel. Arrive back at your pickup location.

“I think it’s just so nice you’re taking care of your grandmother,” an old lady said on the bus. I smiled and took my seat at the front.

On the bus trip home to Florida, we watched *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, the Clint Eastwood movie the old ladies had discussed a couple of days earlier. Adapted from John Berendt’s novel of the same name, the 1997 film stars Kevin Spacey and follows a man on trial for murder. It’s shot on-site in Savannah, and a drag queen, The Lady Chablis, plays a central role to the story. Berendt wrote about The Lady Chablis after they met in a bar, and she plays herself in the film version. In one scene, she wears a full-length dress that hugs her hips. She holds a bulldog’s leash in one hand, and in the other a picnic basket. Julia Sugarbaker would be proud of the outfit. The film gets pretty heavy, and while The Lady Chablis offers some levity, she also gave me a lot to think about. “You know, my ‘T,’” she says matter-of-factly during an emotional moment. “My *truth*.”

We rode away from Savannah and back to Central Florida, where no one is born but many people want to live. As we passed orange trees and cows I thought about my truth: collard greens and family. My truth: Granny Lula’s stories. I’m no longer ashamed to be from Florida; in

fact, I'm pretty proud of it. My truth: I was raised a "Florida Cracker," but I'm still not sure where exactly I fit.

On Ritual: “Looking forward to something is sometimes more fun than the actual thing itself.”

*

A Christmas Special for the Slightly Obsessed

Movie Marathons

By an unwritten law, family members are required to indulge us in our most obsessive pursuits. Well, they at least have to do their best not to make us feel weird about them. What’s family if not a genetically similar group of people required to stop at every roadside attraction on the way to Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon? The earliest form of my latent obsessive nature manifested itself in the collection of *stuff*. You name it, and I collected it. I loved the rush I felt when I found a rusty spoon with a state design on the handle. A new band pin gave me a small high. Magnets, specifically of the Care Bears kind, proved treasures that could make my heart skip a little faster. As a single child at the time, my collections helped keep me company. I had a few family friends my age, but I spent a lot of my childhood time by myself. Surrounded by *stuff*, I felt less lonely. An antique shop filled by rows of dusty paintings, mosaic lamp shades, and other potential collectible pieces, looked to me like the promise land.

There was ritual to my madness. In a few cases, I’d walk into a place and find a piece I instantly loved, something I’d never seen at the right price. While these moments excited me, there was no fight in them. Flea markets transformed into battlegrounds where I dueled hard-nose collector types a good 50 years older than me. *Well, I’ve seen this at another spot for cheaper*, I might say, *so I’m gonna need to think about this*. Then, I’d tell my mom: “Let’s do another round.” We’d wait. I’d pace. This strategy sometimes worked and the seller would lower their price, but more often they wouldn’t or some other person would scoop up my prized piece

I'd probably never find again. My many hours of collection expertise helped me learn to haggle (look disinterested -- coincidentally, also my current go-to tactic on first dates). But these trips did more than make me a stone-faced *Antique Roadshow* loving kid. They also helped me bond with my family who infused my collection life with some childhood whimsy that this chronic old-soul majorly needed.

Along with my collections, movies kept me company as well. I didn't necessarily watch a variety of movies, because I'd find ones I loved -- like *The Brave Little Toaster* and *Searching for Bobby Fischer* -- and re-watch them until my VHS broke. Gramel and I used to see three movies at the theater back-to-back-to-back in one day; we called this our "marathon movie day." One year my quasi-obsessive nature merged with my movie compulsion when I tried to convince Gramel to watch the full Will Ferrell discography with me. As an undergrad, I had worked part-time in the campus library where two of my co-workers constantly spit out Will's movie lines. At the time, my co-workers bonded over Will, while I, a horrible movie-quoter, learned the Library of Congress shelving system. If it's not a *Mean Girls* reference, then I probably won't get it. My co-workers' *you can't sit with us* type discussions tainted my Will perception. But as pop songs teach us, life is about second chances, and I had recently experienced a Will Ferrell epiphany when my former roommate and I watched *The Campaign*. A pretty brilliant political parody co-starring Zach Galifianakis, the movie made me think there was more to Will than just his quotable material. I wanted to collect as many of his movies as I could find, because, well I got it in my head to do so and fixated on the endeavor. I needed a partner in crime for this not to look crazy so I enlisted Gramel, because of her movie marathon background.

At first, Gramel unceremoniously protested my Will idea. She cited a dislike, at worst, and an indifference, at best, toward the comedian. "He tries too hard to be funny," she said.

“He’s not *actually* funny like Billy Crystal who just opens his mouth and out comes something funny.” I didn’t necessarily agree, but I understood her point. Here’s another unwritten law about family: to compete in the power struggle for the TV remote, you must learn each other’s weaknesses. In Gramel’s case, she couldn’t resist a Christmas theme. A quick-survey of her December DVR-list came up with movies boasting titles such as *Crazy for Christmas*, *Holiday High School Reunion*, and basically, any Lifetime movie centered on holiday love. I decided to re-package my Will idea. “We’ll call it the twelve days of Will Ferrell,” I said, “but we’ll try to watch as many movies as we can get.” For me, a Christmas season isn’t really complete without watching *The Grinch*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and *Edward Scissorhands* (a holiday classic by any standard), so I thought maybe I could add a Will movie to my annual list.

Never one to let a theme pass her by, Gramel couldn’t resist and even went so far as clearing some space on her *Crazy for Christmas* DVR for an upcoming Will marathon on TBS. We also drove to one of those discount movie stores in an open air mall, where you can purchase old DVDs for like two dollars. At this store, we bought the likes of *Semi-Pro*, *Superstar*, *Blades of Glory*, *Bewitched*, and Will’s *Saturday Night Live* Collection. My friend had lent me two movies, *Stranger than Fiction* and *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, so after our shopping trip we totaled about 16 Will movies in all. I wanted to watch our entire collection in the days that led up to Christmas, because the actual, present-giving day of Christmas has always given me anxiety. As a kid, I dreaded Christmas day. But I absolutely loved the build up to it – all the cookie baking, movie watching, and carol singing. I was the type of person who’d spend hours touring the grounds of homes drenched in lights while drinking a cup of hot chocolate although in Florida it’s still usually hot for St. Nick’s visit. I knew there’d be a come down from my candy cane high, but I wanted to stretch the sugar buzz as long as possible.

One of the ways I prolonged my red-and-green joy was to pretend to “sleep in” on Christmas day, so my family wouldn’t fly through the gifts we’d spent months buying for each other. I knew as soon as all the presents were unwrapped and the stockings un-stuffed our real reality would set in and everyone would go back to their daily routines. To avoid my Christmas day anxiety, I tried to set up a system in which each family member, there was usually six or so on any given Christmas day, had a set amount of time to open one – and only one – so the whole process would take somewhere around eight hours. This organized procedure, of course, always got thrown out the window somewhere around turn three when everyone decided to unceremoniously tear their way to the good gifts. Then, we’d go off on our own to play with new toys or try on cool clothes. As an adult, I’ve somewhat backed off my Christmas vigilance, because it only ever brought disappointment and caused me, for a couple-three years, to shrug off Christmas altogether. Again, I’m an all or nothing person.

I know I said Gramel’s a sucker for themes, but I am secretly, too. It must be genetic. We collected as many Will movies as possible and got in the Christmas spirit. I eventually hinted at – some might say, “forced” – my other family members to get into the Will-spirit. Nothing says holidays more than coerced family participation.

*

Elf

My 12-year-old brother John stood under my basketball hoop in Gramel’s driveway with “Tyler’s Court” etched in the pavement. He put his hands on his knees. Then, he vomited. A few days earlier, I had attended John’s Christmas Variety Show at his middle school. There we’d

both caught, what I theorized as, some type of 24 hour flu bug. I had thrown up in the middle of the night; it was the first time I puked since I stopped drinking alcohol nearly two-and-a-half years earlier.

At the show, John and his classmates had sung Christmas standards such as “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” and “Santa Claus is Comin’ to Town.” A couple of the shier students had kept their gazes turned to the floor and focused on their feet. John, though, loved the spotlight. He sang like he fronted in a boy band and shimmied a leg-kick. He whipped out a Chorus-line type dance move during “Frosty the Snowman.” If the space had allowed, he’d have probably attempted his famous, at least in my family, breakdance routine. During the show, Mom cried, silently, regal-like. When she was pregnant with John and found out he would be born with Down syndrome, no one in my family knew what to expect. Twelve years later, he was the star – no bias, OK, the most bias – of a middle school show. Though he killed his performance, his school’s where I picked up a throw-up-inducing bug.

After John finished vomiting on Tyler’s Court, Mom, a get-to-action woman, cleaned it up. She left almost no traces of sickness. John took sips of water and gave us hugs. He assured us he was OK. The three of us then slid into Mom’s car where she handed John a plastic bag. The trip from Gramel’s to Mom’s only took five minutes, but even five minutes is a long time when you’re twelve years old and have a stomach ache. I would have needed a lot more time before I attempted a car post-puke. I’m kind of a wimp when it comes to being sick. In matters of vomit, John was tougher than me.

At Mom’s house, we put on *Elf*, a Will flick which costars the doe-eyed Zooey Deschanel. In the movie, Will plays Buddy, a human raised by elves. The three of us made it

about 20 minutes into it before John threw up again. Then, he started to cry, so he and I went to lie down on his bunk bed.

“Play truths or dares,” John said as we both tried to get comfortable on his small mattress.

“Where’d you learn to play that game?” I asked.

“Mommy,” he said. “Truths or Dares.”

“All right,” I said. “Truth or Dare?”

“Dare,” he said.

“I dare you to fall asleep.”

“Come on, Tyler.”

“OK, let’s do a truth. What’s your favorite color?” I asked.

“Blue and black,” he said.

“I really like black,” I said. “It’s my favorite color.”

“What about blue?”

“I like it too,” I said.

“Good,” he said.

We played truth or dare for a few rounds. I mostly tried to get him to rest while I avoided getting germs. John, of course, hated naps. No matter how many times I dared him to sleep, he just wouldn’t turn over and close his eyes, so we eventually decided to go back to our *Elf* watching. Certain Christmas movies elicit strong emotional responses from me. When the Grinch’s heart grows three sizes, so does mine. “You DO think I’m beautiful, don’t you, Charlie Brown?” Lucy asks in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. This Lucy question was my recorded ringtone circa 2006. The Grinch, again, I just love him; I would probably date the green-guy if he

was a real person, because I happen to like crotchety and unavailable men. Anyway, *Elf* also happens to also hit me in a soft spot.

While Will's a prolific comedic actor, I think *Elf* will last as a modern Christmas go-to. In the movie, Will's Yogi-bear-ness really works in this endearing way as he's both oafish but not annoyingly oafish. I would quote something from the movies, but as I said earlier, I'm only a *Mean Girls* quoter. The movie mixes the kitschy humor of eating syrup on spaghetti with green-tights holiday camp. In one scene – **Spoiler Alert!** – Zooey Deschanel, needs to raise the holiday spirit to save Santa Claus's sleigh, so she starts singing, "You better not shout, you better not cry." In an earlier part of the movies, she's ashamed of her voice, but in this scene, she uses it as a way to unite the Scrooges of New York City. After a couple of Zooey's verses, John started singing along with her. His class had sung "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" at the Variety Show. He knew all the words. John's Christmas spirit soared louder than the song. If he had stood in the *Elf* crowd, I have a feeling he would have been at the front of the people kicking his leg out in dance-time rhythm. He'd also would have probably cleared enough room to finally show off his breakdancing skills.

"I love this movie ever," he said. "I keep it here."

*

The Other Guys

During my sophomore year of college, a queer theory professor asked the class something like "How do you know if you're gay." I remember responding, "When you're making out with your girlfriend but thinking about Mark Wahlberg." For some reason Marky Mark just did, and will

probably forever do, *it* for me. For obvious Wahlberg reasons, *The Other Guys*, his buddy-cop movie with Will, was one I'd already seen, in the theater, with Gramel when it came out. I wanted to watch the duo on Mom's football sized living room TV. Our lives could all use a little more Funky Bunch (the name of the 90s hip hop group Wahlberg fronted. Go check out the video for the masterpiece known as "Good Vibrations." You can thank me later).

Before I put in the movie, Mom sat me down at the kitchen table. In her hand, she held a *Duck Dynasty* t-shirt emblazoned with one of the show's catchphrases: "Happy, Happy, Happy."

"Did you hear what one of my *Duck Dynasty* guys said?" Mom asked me. "Not good."

Mom had recently started watching the popular reality show *Duck Dynasty*, because, as she said, it was "really funny" and helped her relax. I had seen only about 10 minutes of the show, which followed a Northern Louisiana family who had become rich after inventing some type of duck call. The show crash landed into the pop cultural zeitgeist because, in my estimation, it showed a fun, Southern family who liked to speak in platitudes. It was like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* but with loveable rednecks. Though I didn't own a television at the time, I knew about the show mostly because I attended graduate school in New Orleans. The Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal had cut funding to public universities like the one I went to and he had also made headlines when he came out in support of the *Duck Dynasty* crew. The politician's priorities and my own interests aside, Mom loved the show. Her whole DVR was filled with episodes including the Christmas special called something like "Duck the Halls." This holiday title, I hate to admit, had made me chuckle.

"I was really disappointed in them for saying the stuff about gay people," Mom said. "I have to take back the shirts I bought. I just can't support them anymore."

I knew it pained Mom to say this about her beloved *Duck Dynasty* boys. I thought I should tell her to keep the show on her DVR schedule, because the guys had probably always been homophobic and racist but the network had just edited those parts out. Plus, if she took back all her merchandise, then did she still want the *Duck Dynasty* Chia Pet I'd bought her for Christmas? It was primed to be my best gift of the 2013 holiday season. I'm a habitually late Christmas shopper; like, sometimes I buy gifts the day before I'm supposed to give them. Earlier in the week she and I had been shopping at Wal-Mart, and we had stopped in the *Duck Dynasty* aisle – yes, a whole aisle dedicated to the show's merchandise. This kind of product over-saturation was just the kind of thing that had fueled my California Raisin addiction decades earlier. If I had been a fan of the show, I would have been in heaven, but alas I didn't even feel the slightest rush to collect any of the camouflage *stuff*. Mom, though, had picked up a Chia Pet where the plant part grew for one of the guy's beards, a signature of the men on the show. Mom always had a green thumb; even when we lived in a small apartment, she could still get her plants to grow thick and lush.

"This is awesome," she had said about the Chia.

"Why don't you get it?" I asked.

"During Christmas time I can only shop for other people," she said. "I can't get anything for myself."

Later that week, I went back to Wal-Mart sans-Mom and bought the Chia Pet for her Christmas present. She had told me I didn't need to get anyone gifts because I was a "starving artist" but even I thought the Chia Pet beard looked pretty cool. With the Chia Pet I held one glorious Christmas moment: Florida, Wal-Mart, and *Duck Dynasty*. But apparently the *Duck* guy had gone and screwed up my thoughtful-gift giving plan. The oldest man, who referred to

himself as the family's "patriarch," had made some statements in an article that came off as homophobic.

These thoughts, mostly about the glory of my gift skills, went through my mind as Mom stood in the kitchen and waited for me to say something about *Duck Dynasty*. I didn't want to ruin our kitchen moment with a "they've probably always been homophobic." Mom had just shown me how supportive and dare I say *progressive* she was. I needed to summon my best after school special response, something like *Mom, you're so awesome and have always been my rock even when it means you have to give up something you enjoy*. This is probably what someone who was better at expressing their feelings in real time would have said, but unfortunately all my feelings are put into poems. In this moment, I fixated on what to do with the Chia Pet. Was I wrong for not wanting to take it back? If I kept it, was I one of those homophobic homosexuals I'd read about?

"Do you want to sit down and watch *The Other Guys*?" I asked to break the silence.

"I could use a laugh," she said. "That's why I liked *Duck Dynasty* so much."

*

Semi-Pro

John and I sat next to each other on Mom's couch. We had picked *Semi-Pro*, because he loved any movie centered on a sports team -- basketball, football, baseball, and even though we didn't live in Canada, hockey, too.

"This guy has a heart of gold," the Tropic Thunder basketball announcer roared. "His brother's a retard. He reads to him and paints him pretty pictures."

When I heard the “r-word,” as we call it in my family, I wanted to cover John’s ears, turn off the movie, and run out of the room. Instead, I stayed still. It’s kind of how I’d react if I unexpectedly saw a snake, my biggest fear; I’d be too scared to move, then it would eat me. I played different scenarios in my mind, because I wasn’t sure if John if knew what the “r-word” meant, how people used the term as a derogatory way to make fun of people with intellectual disabilities. John sat with his full attention on Will, dressed in shorty-shorts, 70s style. *They won’t say the word again, I thought. They’ve already made their joke about it.*

“Yeah his brother is really retarded,” yelled the announcer. “He has all three major kinds of retardation.”

I flinched and tried to play it cool. I didn’t know the proper way to respond, and I was afraid to make a big deal over it. If John didn’t already know people would use mean words, I didn’t want this movie-moment to hurt his feelings. But I also feared he would assume I thought the “r-word” was OK to use. That I was one of those people who would say mean things. I needed someone to come and rescue me from this big, venomous snake.

At 12 years old, John had already dealt with circumstances I hoped he’d never encounter or at-least ones he’d only encounter when he was near 40 years old and I stood next to him. Along with mean people, this had included body things. As a sixth grader, his teachers had already led a “sexual education” type discussion. He developed “crushes” on a few girls (yes, more than one). At school, his special needs class mixed in with the rest of the population during gym class. His outgoing personality led him to interact with everyone; he even played basketball with the eighth grade boys, which was unheard of for a measly grade sixer. His teacher told me she had kept an eye on this basketball game, but she thought it was great he put himself in the mix. But, kids, as anyone who’s ever been one knows, are the second meanest type of humans.

The first meanest people are, of course, anonymous internet commenters, who, though usually, are not always pre-teens. Still, I wanted to big-brother protect John as much as possible. I just didn't know how to do it.

A few minutes after the "r-word" in *Semi-Pro* Mom walked through the living room where we watched the movie. One of the characters said a "bad word." There was actually a lot of cursing in the first few minutes. Mom spotted the snake and told us to keep to get a move on. She suggested we turn off the movie. I finally knew what to do. Mom's orders, after all.

Later, Mom and I sat down to watch an ESPN segment she had recorded for me. It was about a boy with Down syndrome who played on his middle school basketball team. We had talked about John trying out for the basketball team. I had mentioned it sometime near his first day of school, and he lit up at the idea. John had played on basketball team once before when he was around five or six. For small kids, the basketball games were more about running up and down the court, no real rules. He had loved playing on the team, but, at the time didn't understand that you couldn't just sit down on the court when you didn't feel like running anymore. We hoped he'd have a chance to join the basketball team sometime during middle school. Everyone thought John could eventually make his school's team if he learned to listen better. The boy on ESPN had given Mom a lot of hope, and she had saved it for me to watch.

"The kid had a pretty sweet shot," Mom said. "People tweeted about it or whatever and got it on TV."

As we found out, though, the segment was no longer on the DVR. Mom knew the culprit. When she asked John about the show, he gave her a straight-forward answer.

"I deleted it," he said.

He loved DVR and knew how to use their TV better than I did. Mom interrogated him about the ESPN segment when I wasn't around. He told her he deleted it, because the boy sounded like him – “with the same tongue as me.”

John and I had never talked about Down syndrome. I am already ashamed of how I'll respond when the conversation comes up between us. I know I will disappoint him. I will want to cover my ears and run out of the room. I cannot protect him from people. I cannot even protect him from a TV show. My heart broke in a million pieces when she told me about his “same-tongue” comment, and this made me turn to the internet to look up the ESPN segment.

I found the clip about Owen Groesser on YouTube. During one of his games, he swished three-pointer after three-pointer. I had to agree with Mom. He does have a pretty sweet shot.

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Blades of Glory

For Christmas Eve John wanted me to crash with him, so after we decorated Santa's cookie, I climbed onto the couch-bed. I almost always refused to sleep in the same bed as him. Gramel described his sleeping style as a “helicopter.” Unfortunately for me, John missed the whole “not a creature was stirring” memo. Any time I'd start to fall asleep, he'd say “Merry Christmas” or he'd move closer to me and ask me about Santa. “You need to go to sleep or Santa won't come,” I finally said, and for which I'd later feel bad about. This Naughty List response didn't work anyway, because ignored me. “I think I hear reindeers,” he said.

On Christmas day, we watched *Blades of Glory* and opened presents from Santa. John focused on ripping of wrapping paper, not the movie. He wanted new games – games, games,

games! When I was John's age I always harbored a sense of anxiety around Christmas. There's so much build up to a day that flies by in a few hours. I never wanted to wake up early on Christmas, but John lived a different kind of early bird life. I had put on *Blades of Glory* during present time, because I had fallen behind on my Will-watching and wanted to see something wintry. Besides Gramel – who loved figure skaters like Brian Boitano and Michelle Kwan – I didn't think anyone really paid it much attention. In the movie Will and Jon Heder start out as bitter ice-skating rivals who eventually pair up for the couples' competition. Will's the king of sports-related comedies. If he can wear tights or shorty-shorts for a role, he'll be there.

"I wouldn't want John saying any of those words from the movie," my stepdad said. "I think of things in a different way than I did when John was born, man."

Um, OK, I thought. I couldn't remember any f-bombs or foul-language in *Blades of Glory*. I'm pretty sure my step-dad was just trying to judge my taste in movies. He's also the type of guy who thinks a room's left on light hikes up the energy bill and will yell "Who's responsible for this" when one (me) forgets to turn off a light after one finishes in the bathroom. I brushed off his comment and then looked at the *Duck Dynasty* Chia Pet I had ultimately decided to give Mom. I craved gift-giving glory.

Though she thanked me for the "thoughtful" gift, a couple days after Xmas, she returned it and the rest of the beloved items from her *Duck Dynasty* collection.

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Closing Credits

My collection habit may have manifested from childhood loneliness and the Will Ferrell marathon as exorcism for my *I'm-not-at-all-ever-funny* demons which I still harbor. That's a pretty bleak outlook. It's also something I only realized way after the fact, because my family always supported my eccentric endeavors. While other people may have described me as a "weird, quiet" kid, they -- for better or worse -- let me fly like a free bird.

We watched ten Will Ferrell movies in total. We saw *Zoolander*, *Old School* (a mistake to watch with your grandmother), *Bewitched*, *Superstar*, *Elf*, *The Other Guys*, *Anchorman*, *Semi-Pro* (a few minutes), *Blades of Glory*, and *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. We took John with us to see *Anchorman 2* in the theater. The movie was rated PG-13, and while John was only 12, the Motion Picture Association of America isn't the boss of us. John seemed uninterested during the movie until one of the final scenes when Will swims with a shark – one of John's favorite animals (he loves Discovery Channel's "Shark Week"). He talked about his shark-friend for a good part of the car ride home.

We would have watched more of Will's comic art pieces, but Gramel's DVD player rejected most of the used movies we bought. Also, the TBS marathon she DVR'ed came out all pixelated and unwatchable. An avid TV watcher, this cable mix-up sent Gramel off on a long call to her provider. I remember her on the phone saying something to the effect of: "We're trying to watch these Will Ferrell movies." In that moment I had a deep sense of pride in my grandmother who had changed from a Will protester into a somewhat fan. Oddly enough, Gramel loved *Superstar*, a weird little movie featuring an arm pit sniffing Molly Shannon. Gramel said she

liked it because Will “wasn’t the main star,” but, still, I’m scoring that one a win for Ferrell among the grandmother demographic.

Before I left Florida to go back to where I lived in New Orleans, I filled my suitcase with a few of the movies we didn’t get around to watching – *Everything Must Go* and *Stepbrothers* (which Gramel wouldn’t watch and called “vulgar”). I had planned on watching the movies as soon as I got back to my apartment. But I haven’t yet. When you do something with your family, you get used to having them next to you. From movie marathons to geode-breaking on Thanksgiving morning and “my family always does this” on Christmas Eve, it’s just not the same without those who indulge in your “themes.” Without these people, themes, movie marathons, collections or anything of the like just aren’t as fun. They might even be a tiny bit weird.

VITA

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